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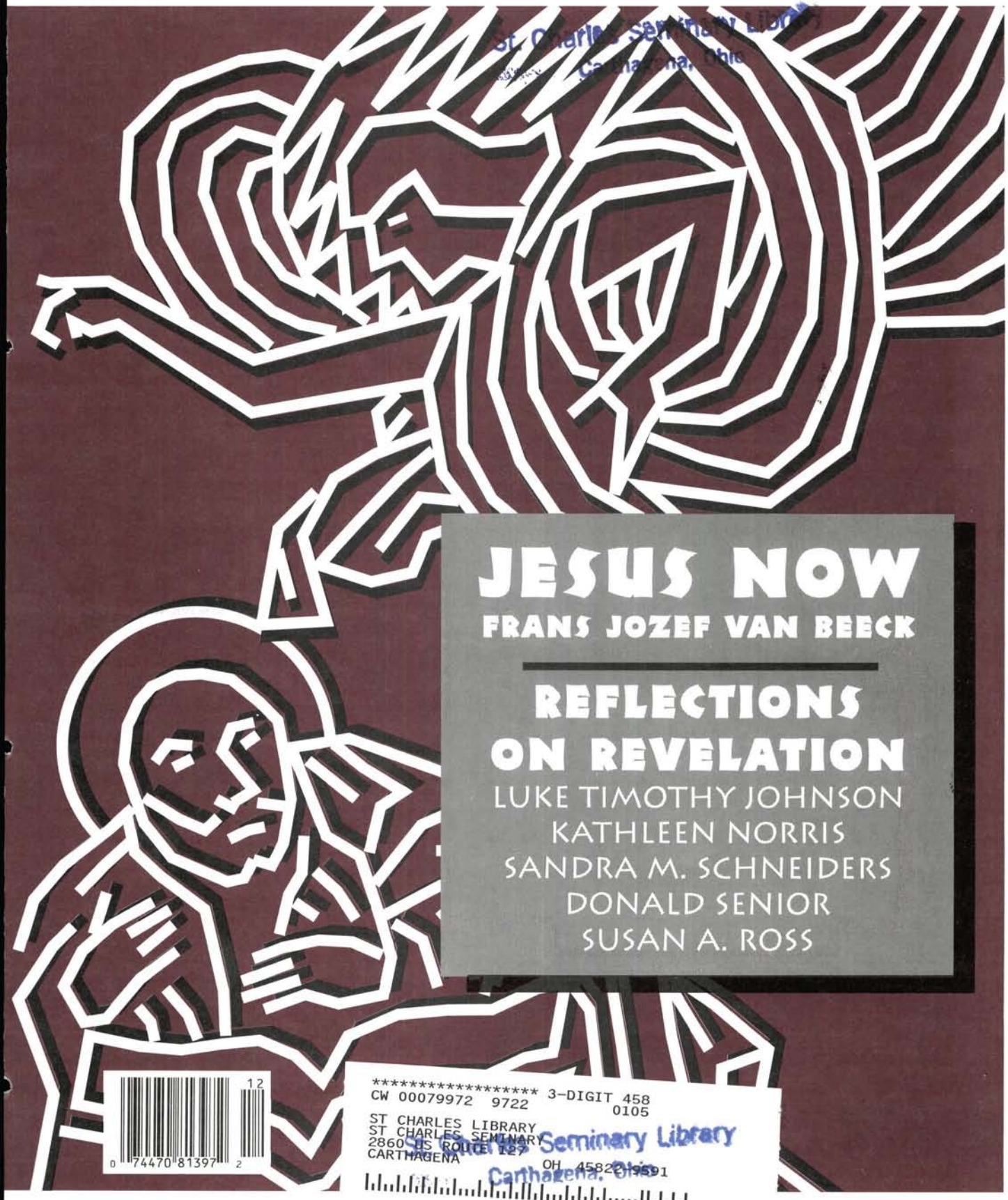

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COMMONWEAL

June 20, 1997 / Volume CXXIV, Number 12

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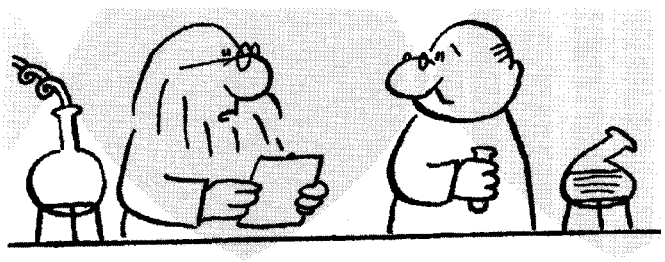

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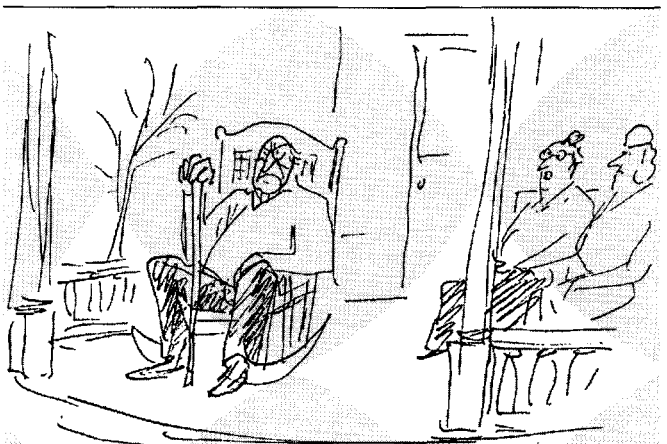

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To the Editors

Honesty is best policy

Two aspects of your May 23 issue seemed to me especially commendable, and revelatory of the magazine's urge to be an honest journal. One, Paul Baumann's refreshingly candid piece about James Carroll, which hammers a superb writer (who is interviewed and lauded elsewhere in the same issue) for a shoddy piece of writing elsewhere; and, two, Michael Garvey's review of Garry Wills's *John Wayne's America*. Wills is a terrific scholar and a deft writer, but Garvey correctly sums up this particular book of Wills's as unfortunate.

It is refreshing, to say the least, for readers to be able to count on a magazine's honesty. Perhaps in the end that honesty is the single most important reason that we lend reading-time, money, and the compliment of close attention to a journal. Bravo.

BRIAN DOYLE
Portland, Ore.

Charity & clarity

I greatly appreciated Paul Baumann's commentary on James Carroll's *New Yorker* article regarding the church and the Holocaust. It certainly demanded a response, and your writer met the challenge with charity, clarity, and close analysis. Congratulations!

JOSEPH A. BRZEZICKI, S.J.
Ottawa, Ont.

The son also razes

John Spalding's interview with James Carroll and Paul Baumann's comment on Carroll's *New Yorker* piece complement each other well. Whatever problems Carroll had with his air force general dad, it is clear from the younger Carroll's attempt to pin direct responsibility for the Holocaust on the Catholic church that he is quite a warrior himself—a scorched-earth warrior at that.

Anyone regularly exposed to Carroll's musings on the Op-Ed pages of the *Boston Globe* understands that his published views on the church and religion are always depressingly predictable, betraying an overriding obsession with power and authority in the church. When, for example, he urges the church to liberalize its stand on abortion, his language is more political than theological.

In his analysis of Carroll's *New Yorker* hatchet job, Paul Baumann exactly diagnoses what Carroll is really about: "But worst of all [Carroll's essay] finally trivializes the Holocaust, reducing it to another gambit to be played in intra-Catholic and intra-American culture wars....But all of this, I think, sounds suspiciously like an argument about the nature of authority in the church advanced in the guise of moral outrage over the Holocaust."

In keeping with the scorched-earth policy he deploys against the church, Carroll defines John Paul II's papacy as "tragic." What's really tragic is the tendency of some on the right and the left, including Carroll, to place the demands of ideology well ahead of the requirements of charity and truth.

MARK E. RONDEAU
North Adams, Mass.

(Continued on page 29)

Business Manager: *Commonweal* is looking for a new business manager, someone with promotion and business skills committed to working with a small staff and a limited budget to ensure the financial future of the magazine. Previous experience with a magazine, small business, or nonprofit organization is a plus.

The business manager will work with the staff on a wide variety of tasks. These include marketing and promotion, circulation, fund-raising, development, and general business matters, as well as supervising the business staff.

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Correction ■ In my Editor's Noteboook concerning James Carroll's essay in the *New Yorker* on the church and the Holocaust, I mistakenly wrote that Italian Jews were "far and away the best protected in Europe." It has been pointed out to me that Denmark's Jewish population was better protected. I regret the error. I think, however, that my basic argument stands, for Italian Jews were certainly among the best protected in Europe, and many historians have acknowledged the role played by the church in hiding Jews from the Nazis.

PAUL BAUMANN

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Plowshares into canons

Earlier this year, Sister Alice Gallin, O.S.U., reported in these pages on the arduous but ultimately successful effort of U.S. bishops and Catholic university presidents to forge ordinances governing relations between the church and the university ("Making Colleges Catholic," March 28, 1997). The ordinances had to satisfy the norms set forth in *Ex corde ecclesiae* (John Paul II's 1990 apostolic constitution on higher education) while respecting the distinctive legal and educational context in which U.S. Catholic colleges and universitites operate. Her assessment that bishops and academics reached common ground was reflected in the 224-6 vote of approval at the bishops' November 1996 meeting.

The next question—Can common ground be reached with the Vatican?—is now on the table. The ordinances have been returned by the Congregation for Catholic Education. A "second draft" is wanted. Nothing remarkable in that, perhaps. What are bureaucracies for, if not clarification and amplification? Indeed, if ordinances that play as well in Rome as in the United States can effectively insure the Catholic identity of Catholic higher education, then why not third and fourth drafts?

But what if ordinances as such cannot accomplish this task? And what if inappropriately drawn rules don't help but hurt?

The draft ordinances approved by the NCCB do two important things. First, they recognize that a school's Catholic identity and character must be fostered from within; second, they respect the American practice of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Those basics rose out of the acceptance, by bishops as well as educators, that the issue of Catholic identity in higher education is not at heart a juridical problem but a cultural and educational one. Making or keeping colleges Catholic is a concern for both educators and hierarchs; as the draft ordinances say, they can pursue it best together, by means of "mutual trust, close and consistent cooperation, and continuing dialogue."

The Congregation surely understands all this; yet it is insisting that Catholic colleges and universities must be juridically tied to the local bishop. In addition, the local bishop "has the right and the duty to watch over the preservation and strengthening of their Catholic character." The Congregation also says that a "full application" of canon 812, requiring a theologian to have a *mandatum* to teach Catholic theology, must be incorporated in the ordinances. Furthermore, it finds the ordinances lacking in the juridical elements that define "Catholic universities as university and as Catholic in all aspects of their organization, life, and activity." And it wants the "essential elements" of a mission statement for Catholic schools included as well.

We assume that the Congregation, the bishops, and Catholic colleges and universities share a common goal: maintaining the Catholic character of Catholic institutions. But rather than helping to achieve the common goal, a juridical outlook will erode efforts at building trust, cooperation, and dialogue; undermine precisely those internal mechanisms meant to nourish Catholic identity; and drive exasperated administrators and faculty away from the genuine challenge of up-

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In keeping with *Commonweal*'s usual schedule, only one issue is published each month during July and August. The next issue will be dated July 18.

holding Catholic identity in American culture.

The future of Catholic higher education in the United States is not so secure that the Congregation and the various NCCB committees and subcommittees can afford to get this wrong. These schools are increasingly in the hands of lay faculty and lay boards; the schools themselves have corporate independence under U.S. law; their futures depend on the hard work and vigorous support of lay Catholics.

A misreading of this future for the sake of canonical clarity would be a terrible loss to American society, which desperately needs the leavening effects of Catholic schools. Worse, it would be a tragedy for the church, for which these colleges and universities are points of contact with the world of learning and the ever-new generations that pass through their gates.

The Congregation's juridical solution offers the wrong answer to a serious problem and a daunting challenge. It should be resisted.

OF SEVERAL MINDS

SIDNEY CALLAHAN

ARE 'PRE-EMBRYOS' HUMAN?

What else could they be?

Mr. Randolfe Wicker, head of the Cloning Rights United Front in New York, intends to clone himself as soon as he can find a scientist to cooperate. According to a story in the *New York Times* (May 25, 1997), Wicker claims that his right to be cloned should not be any more the business of the government than "a woman's decision to have an abortion is." Not surprisingly, he's also enthusiastic about cloning to further research in disease prevention.

So opens another round in the debate over the status of embryonic life. Prolife persons should not become too encouraged by recent votes to ban partial-birth abortions because a revulsion toward late abortion-infanticides won't be much help in protecting early embryonic lives. Since embryos don't resemble tiny babies, it will be an uphill countercultural struggle to ban RU 486 or other morning-after pills. Embryos in Petri dishes, whether clones or not, will be even harder to protect since they will be covered by the mantle of scientific research.

Even some Catholic moral theologians argue that a conceptus or zygote does not reach the status of a human individual until after implantation in the placenta takes place. Only after about two weeks, when the possibility of twinning is over, does the implanted embryo develop "a primitive streak." This integration and orientation of a body marks "irreversible individuality," since before this stage all the cells of the zygote are equipotential. For some of these thinkers, who sometimes employ the dodgy term "pre-embryo," human conception is a process which is not completed until implantation.

If only I could agree with these arguments; then I could also agree that certain abortifacient drugs, selection procedures, and embryo experiments could be approved. Catholic moral theologians proposing delayed hominization rely upon the argument that the form of the human body is necessary in order to have "ensoulment" or the creation of an individual human person. After all, goes their argument, no "person" can exist until irreversible individuality has been achieved.

"Hi, honey, I'm cloned."

But how can this be? My reading of the new evolutionary biology assures me that species and population membership is the key component of identity. As Stephen Jay Gould writes in a recent article on how a new species emerges, "individuals do not branch, only populations do." Individuals depend for their nature on their being a member of a species, and no one doubts that once the process of fertilization or syngamy takes place, the human conceptus is a member of *Homo sapiens*. At that point, processing the inherited species-specific genetic information produces human status.

Individuals depend upon the population as a whole, which exists before and beyond them. Group facts and entities really exist. A family exists before offspring; a team is more than its players. A conceptus is human when it is part of the human species. Of course, the incredibly dynamic potential of human embryos is also crucial, but even when this human potential will not have any chance or probability of fulfillment due to natural or human interventions, the embryo is still human.

Morally then, I must conclude that human status arises from membership in the one human species or one human

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family, which brings with it human dignity and equal worth with all other members. Achieving individuality is less important than collective identity. Besides, every living being is perpetually involved in dynamic processes of development and differentiation, as well as processes of de-individuation and disintegration, on the way to death. When the genetic program that keeps a body together winds down, different systems begin to fall apart.

Moreover, if irreversible differentiated individuality becomes the crucial marker for human status, then what happens to the status of Siamese twins or of multiple individuation: autistic children, those with various dementias, or cases of multiple personality disorders? For those who argue that having the form of an individuated body is necessary for ensoulment, I would offer the alternative proposal that form inheres in the genetic information in the species rather than the individual. If form means active information shaping a coherent entity over time, the genetic information we inherit provides our human form; it is our formal cause.

As for "ensoulment," it's a concept I'm not sure I understand. But it seems doubtful to me that ensoulment of human beings should take place one by one only when a "primitive streak" appears. Would it not make more sense to see humanity's special giftedness to be a collective creative gift to the whole human species from its inception?

I am encouraged in this collectivist approach by remembering that the gospel seems to insist that humans are members of one another in one body. While we all fell in Adam, we are all redeemed in Christ because the Word becomes flesh. Our collective membership in one unified body or one human family seems to be necessary if Christ's redemption is effected for all, once and for all. Humans have been created in the image of God, but the fact that God actually becomes one with humankind ensures human dignity and worth. Even including embryos?

Yes, but it's hard to comprehend this truth since embryonic life is microscopic in size. Then there is the further doubt arising from the vulnerability of human embryonic life's survival rate; so many embryos, before implantation and after, do not survive. Of course, the human death rate is always 100 percent in the end. Can we really care about all these lost lives? Millions of lost embryos join millions of aborted fetuses who join millions of human lives lost in famines, floods, genocides, and pandemics, not to mention from normal natural causes.

With our limited human sensibilities, I'm afraid we can only truly grieve for those near and dear to us who have shared our lives. Who is Hecuba to me or I to Hecuba? Fortunately, the presence or absence of another person's emotional investment does not determine the moral worth of a human life, no matter at what stage of development.

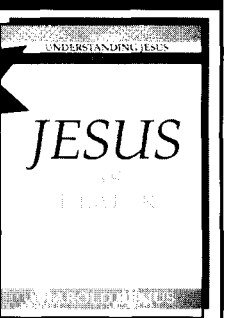
Nor does the microscopic size and invisibility of embryos determine their moral value. It is instructive to remember the scale of time and space of the universe in which embryos and adult lives exist. Billions of galaxies with millions of stars glimmer out there, barely visible. To any observer beyond the horizon, there would be little difference in size or temporal lifespan between a human embryo and an adult human being. At the other end of the scale, when you consider the majority of existing life forms on earth, the human embryo appears as an incredibly complex and highly developed organism.

The upshot of these moral reflections is the need to take up the unpopular and fatiguing cause of protecting embryos and early fetal lives. No reproductive desire or technological imperative to increase knowledge can morally justify the manipulation and destruction of embryos. Let there be no human cloning, no RU486, no more select-and-destroy missions in the womb or in the lab. And what, pray tell, should be done with those embryos already in freezers, who should never have been created in such quantities? I have no idea. But I do know that they should not be used for scientific experiments or given over to cloning-rights enthusiasts. □

Understanding Jesus Today...From Cambridge

Jesus as Healer
Harold Remus

NEW



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E.J. Dionne, Jr.

BILL'S OTHER PROBLEM

Not Paula but the party

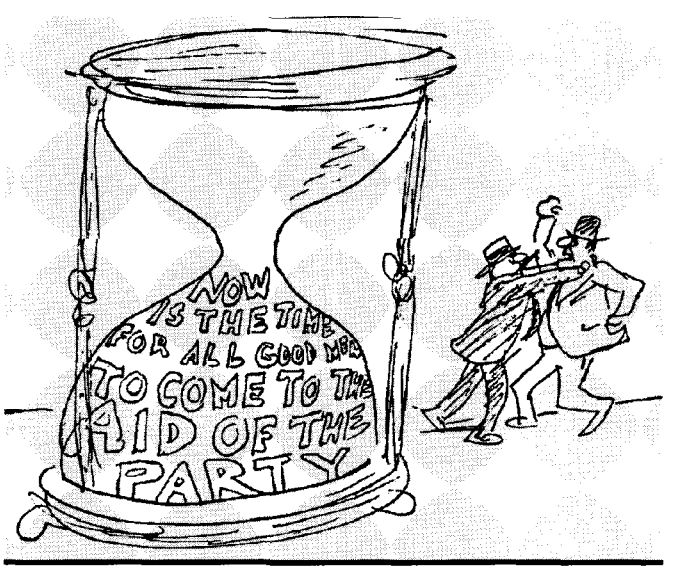
On the same day that the front pages were reporting the Supreme Court's ruling that Paula Jones can pursue her sexual harassment suit against President Bill Clinton, the inside pages noted a story far more important to Clinton's legacy and to voters. Call it the big news: The Collapse of the Clinton Consensus.

The story took the form of a cross-country barrage of words between Vice-President Al Gore and House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt over trade with China and the recent budget deal. Speaking in Detroit, Gephardt came out hard against the administration's decision to continue China's trading privileges. He charged that the Clinton policy has been "far too weak when it comes to China" and its human-rights violations.

Gore's immediate response from New Hampshire may have made Gephardt smile. Gore insisted that the administration wasn't satisfied with China's progress on human rights either, but that "what they choose to do is not entirely in our control." That may be true, but it didn't sound strong.

The fighting between Gore and Gephardt on China and also on the Clinton-Lott budget deal—Gephardt opposed it, Gore loyally defended it—was rightly interpreted as the preliminary jousting for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2000. But Gephardt's and Gore's personal ambitions are less important than what their fight says about Clinton's largest political achievement: his success in recasting the Democratic party and uniting it on new ground. That project is in big trouble.

When Clinton ran for president in 1992, he set out to bury some of the issues that had divided Democrats in the past and to forge agreement on questions that threatened to divide it in the future. Clinton has been quite successful in plowing under old issues. On two big sets of questions—crime and (perhaps ironically in light of the Court's Paula Jones decision) family values—Clinton helped Democrats overcome a quarter-century of squabbling and setbacks. Clinton's initiatives on guns and more cops have been accompanied by falling crime rates. Democrats are seen as tough enough.



On the problems faced by families, Clinton has redefined the debate. It is now less a vague argument about "permissiveness" and much more about education and the time pressures faced by working families. Democrats aren't fighting much about these issues, and Republicans are at a loss.

But the Clinton consensus has not worked on what are the new wedge issues inside the Democratic party: trade, human rights, and public spending. Even on these matters, Clinton succeeded for a while. He united most of his party around his successful 1993 budget and in his fight against the Republicans' 1995 budget. Initially, he pledged to be far tougher on China's human-rights violations than President George Bush was. He promised that free-trade accords would be accompanied by international agreements on the environment and labor rights.

But on each of these issues, Clinton altered his course. On China, he embraced Bush's policy of (depending on your point of view) accommodation or engagement. This angered human-rights advocates. On trade, open markets have taken priority over negotiating social protections. In deciding to deal with the Republicans on the budget, Clinton bought into both a set of tax cuts that many Democrats despise and a lid on domestic spending that many of them say can't or shouldn't hold.

The Democratic split on these questions has given Gephardt his opening. But neither Gephardt nor Gore nor any other Democrat will find it easy to win unless some version of the Clinton consensus is reestablished. And finding unity is harder for the party in the White House than out. Trade could blow the party apart, and so could a Clinton decision to sign tax cuts unacceptable to a majority of Democrats.

The fraying inside the party is a particular challenge to Gore. One test of whether he shares Clinton's gift for maneuvering, says an influential Democrat neutral in the presidential race, is whether he can broker agreement between the party's free traders and advocates of international rules on labor, the environment, and human rights. But to do this, he needs Clinton's blessing.

The Paula Jones case is a serious embarrassment to Clinton, and the Court deprived him of an easy way out. He may now have to settle the case to prevent further damage. But the larger threat to Clinton's hopes for history comes not from Ms. Jones, but from his fellow Democrats. The president who would be the "the healer of the breach" needs to heal the widening breach in his own party. □

E.J. Dionne, Jr., *is the author of* They Only *Look* Dead *(Simon & Schuster) and a syndicated columnist.* *© 1997,* Washington Post *Writers Group.*

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WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

Coming to know Jesus

Frans Jozef van Beeck

In the church's great tradition, issues regarding Jesus are never just that—issues regarding Jesus. Issues regarding Jesus have always been wholly inseparable from faith in the One God, faithful and true. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, this God is utterly transcendent and holy, yet never remote, neutral, faceless, or equivalently absent. "I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14) means: "Never mind what I am, as long as I am with you." The living God is intimately present to every creature, especially to human beings. Augustine put it as follows: "You are higher above me than my highest height, and deeper in me than my deepest depth."

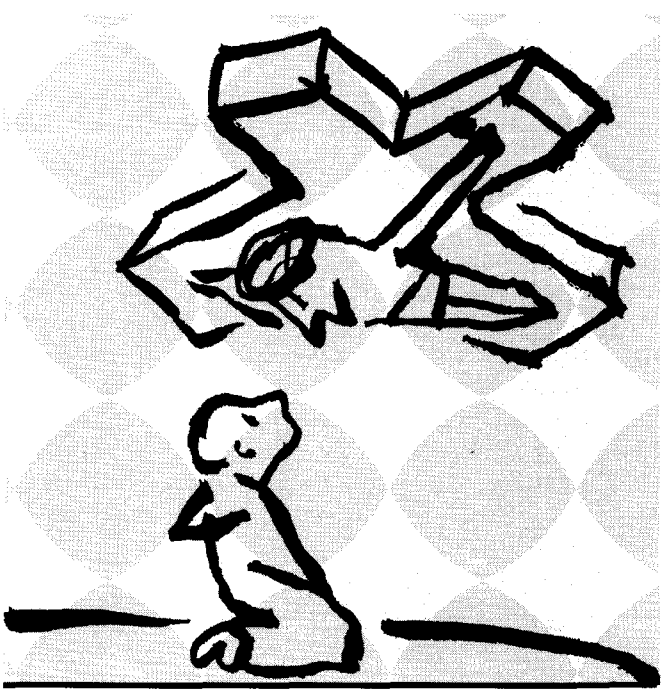
To Jews and Christians alike, God's intimate presence becomes a matter of common experience through *witnesses*. For the nations at large, these witnesses are the naturally discernible manifestations of God's provident care: sun, rain, seasons, plants for food and shelter, animals for company and food. For Israel, privileged to know the living God, the main witnesses are memorials, buildings, events, and persons: the child born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age; the cairn erected by Jacob at Bethel; the rescue of Joseph; the Tent of Encounter in the desert; the manna; the water from the rock; the person of the king; the Jerusalem Temple (read Yves Congar's *The Mystery of the Temple*). The most penetrating witness to God's presence became the *Torah*—God's Law. In it, Judaism believes, Divine Wisdom herself takes delight in dwelling among God's people. More dramatic witnesses are persons: Israel's prophets, singers, and sages, with Moses and Elijah, David, and Solomon as their respective prototypes. The Letter to the Hebrews features Jesus as the apex of a long line ("a cloud") of witnesses in Israel (11:1–12); the Fourth Gospel makes Jesus the witness *par excellence*: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In the person of Jesus, Only-Begotten God, Temple and Torah Embodied, the Invisible God in person addresses the world (John 1:14; 18).

Issues regarding Jesus are never just issues regarding *the Jesus of the past*. At the heart of the Christian church stands Jesus *present and alive* on the ever-present strength ("in the Spirit") of the One True and Living God. "I am the first and the last, and the living One; I was dead, and behold, I am the One alive for ever and ever" (Rev. 1:18). Faith in Christ alive originates in what has been called, from the earliest tradition on, *his Resurrection*.

Christ's Resurrection is the origin of Christian *worship and prayer*, which inseparably links God and Jesus. For his part, *Jesus* is professed as Lord "to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11); conversely, *God* is "blessed" as "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 1:3). And through Christ, "the Amen, the faithful and true witness" (Rev. 3:14), Christians say their "*Amen*," to the glory of God (2 Cor. 1:20). The source of all Christian speaking and thinking about the *historical* Jesus is faith in Jesus *alive and present*. A dead Jesus leaves behind only shame and disappointed hopes (Luke 24:2). Conclusion: *Speaking about Jesus only in the past tense is essentially deficient*.

History versus Nourishment

Remarkably, most New Testament writings, many of them older than the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke as we have them, say little about the life of the *historical* Jesus. They know that he lived in Palestine, lived for others, and was put to death by crucifixion and buried under Pontius Pilate. Still, they have much



Frans Jozef van Beeck, S.J., *is the John Cardinal Cody Professor of Theology at Loyola University Chicago.*

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to say about the *historic* significance of the *present* life of Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ—the source and center of Christian *faith in God*. Now this *historic* significance of Jesus Christ is also what the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John as we have them are designed to proclaim. Accordingly, while the Gospel narratives (even John's) contain true recollections of what Jesus typically (and even actually) did and said, their *point* is not historical accuracy, but encouragement to Christian worship, conduct, and teaching. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Gospels contain events and sayings that the various faith communities attributed to Jesus by hindsight, inspired by faith. Christian faith, after all, is *also* creative. It creates history.

Now suppose I am an intelligent vegetarian in possession of an exceptionally fine cookbook entitled *Vegetarian and Informed: The Profusion of Plants as Sound and Savory Nourishment*. Needless to say, I am not only a happy eater, and a healthy one to boot; I have also picked up a whole body of information about nuts; lettuces; fruits with pips, stones, and countless tiny seeds; pods with seeds; the various grains; all kinds of cabbages; roots, tubers, bulbs, carrots, and beets; mushrooms of every shape; edible seaweeds; assorted spinaches, artichokes, peppers, and endives; edible flowers and even tree barks—you name it. The word *profusion* in the title is no exaggeration; neither are the words *sound and savory nourishment*. Not surprisingly, I have developed an interest in botany as well. But this is where the problem starts. My friend Kevin teaches plant physiology. Not only did he have little or no idea what I was talking about when I told him about what I know about plants; he did not seem to regard it as legitimate knowledge at all! He just smiled condescendingly when he noticed I had my *Vegetarian and Informed* in my study, even though, of course, my kitchen is its real home. What is worth knowing about plants, he told me, is found in botany books and related texts in physiology, period. He has a point, of course, but he is wrong. He forgets the nourishment part.

Now this reminds me of something. I read the Bible regularly, especially the Gospels. They are just as nourishing as the cuisine I cherish, except that the nourishment is, well, spiritual. I use the Oxford Study Bible, with the Apocrypha. There is much of interest there. From the introductions to each book or collection of letters or what have you, I have learned a great deal about biblical history—nothing like what I know about plants, mind you, but a fair amount. It helps me put what I read in context. But context is not content. My best clues to the *meaning* of what I read I find in the literary introductions and the footnotes, and, of course, from what I hear in church (when the homily is decent), in my Bible study group, and from prayer, especially the psalms and some of the New Testament hymns, embedded in the text of some of the Letters and in the Gospel of Luke.

Now comes this young friend of mine, John, a former seminarian. He tells me that the Bible is full of imaginary stuff that never occurred. Conclusion: You are pretty much on your own when you want to decide what any passage really means. One thing, he says, is certain: You *must* read the Bible *critically*, and you *have* to go to the latest scholarship to know what the *real* story is. Basically, what matters are *myth and meaning*, John tells me; for faith purposes, what *actually happened* is no big deal. Jesus may well have been a totally fascinating teacher or a countryside philosopher or a prophet who came to a sorry end; what counts is whether his example and philosophy are still relevant today. So the *myth* of Jesus is the real truth, says John. But I say, if you can't count on *any* historical truth *at all*, why bother? And if the Bible's "*real*" meaning is a matter of scholarly opinion, why believe?

Now John has a friend, Joe. He, too, is a former Catholic seminarian, but he told me he got so fed up with the radical stuff they taught him about the Bible in the seminary that he became a fundamentalist for a while. He came back to the church, though, and he is now considering a real, old-fashioned *Catholic* seminary. He tells me that if the Bible is full of stuff that never happened you might as well forget it. If you can't count on historical accuracy, he says, why believe? If the Bible doesn't literally mean what it says, what's the point? But I say, *that's* the easy way out of an obvious problem. Besides, Joe is quite uptight, and he has an annoying habit of correcting everything I say about the faith. Some priest he'll be some day, that Joe. He's got lots to learn.

Which Is Home to Which?

The home of cookbooks is the kitchen, not the study or the lab (although you can profitably take them there). The home of the Gospels, along with the other New Testament writings and indeed the entire Jewish Bible, is the Christian community meeting, not the study (although you can profitably take them there, too).

Now remember, the Bible ("*The Book*") only *looks* like a book. In reality it is a *library*, written and edited in the course of about 1,400 years. Small wonder you have to *learn* how to read it, and every part of it, the way it is meant to be read. Now many of the biblical writings are prophetic—that is, they deliver *messages about mystery and precepts for conduct* in the context of historical narratives. (Remember, some of the Old Testament writings we Christians call "historical books"—Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings—are called "the Former Prophets" by the Jews, to this day. Israel's history, in other words, is to be read as *spiritually significant history*, meant to enable Jews as well as Christians to make sense of their faith lives *now*.) Now there is plenty of historical stuff in the Bible, but none of it is in there just *because* it is historical. As a Christian, therefore, you have to learn how to interpret passages that *look* like history in the light of your *present* experience of the Spirit. To pick up that art, you must agree to be part of a living, faith-guided, *authoritative tradition* of Bible reading (especially in the liturgy) and of reliable biblical interpretation. There is no inside track to biblical truth, not even for biblical scholars.

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How about the historical Jesus? First of all, finding out all we can about the historical Jesus is completely legitimate and very important. What good would it be to believe in the Word made flesh if nothing historical were known or could be known about him? For all the noise the Jesus Seminar is making, it cannot be faulted for trying. There are problems, though. To some questions there simply *are* no satisfactory answers. Besides, even the fairest questions have agendas behind them, and often those agendas are hidden.

The search for the historical Jesus *as separate from faith in the living Christ* started well over two centuries ago, with an intellectual move made by the German thinker Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81). Lessing was honest enough to state that he regarded the Christian faith as dead. In his view, it had gotten caught between the wrangling papists and Protestants to the point where it had died the death of a thousand senseless disputes. Accordingly, Lessing thought, the living Jesus Christ, once demonstrably present in the church by events and experiences of Spirit and Power, was a thing of the past; *what remained of Christianity was only the historical record of Jesus' own religion.* Lessing found this religion admirable; besides, it perfectly agreed with his own agenda: to develop a truly natural, reasonable religion. Many of Lessing's residually Christian and post-Christian contemporaries implicitly shared his agenda.

Lessing is only the first major representative of a modern tradition whose constant theme is: "Christianity becomes a superior religion once you understand it reasonably and biblically." In other words, this approach commends the Christian faith *by encouraging radical reconstructions* of it. In our day, such reconstructions are frequently offered as the fruit of the latest findings of biblical scholarship; they are usually touted as stimulating and original—which they often enough are. But what the reconstructionists invariably end up doing is *projecting onto* their "historical" Jesus their own (mostly unstated) prejudgments, agendas, and opinions. George Tyrrell (1861-1909) made this point by writing that the Christ they see, across centuries of Catholic darkness, is nothing but their own liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.

This "residually Christian" religiosity is the prevalent climate in North American Christianity. Fortunately, it values freedom of religion; more dubiously, it aims at being both "liberal" and "evangelical." There is one big difference, though, with Lessing's reasonable "superior" religion. For Lessing remembered there had been a normative Great Tradition. He still thought that calling yourself a Christian does not necessarily make you one. Flannery O'Connor made Lessing's point with characteristic candor: "Unfortunately," she wrote, "the word Christian is no longer reliable. It has come to mean anybody with a golden heart."

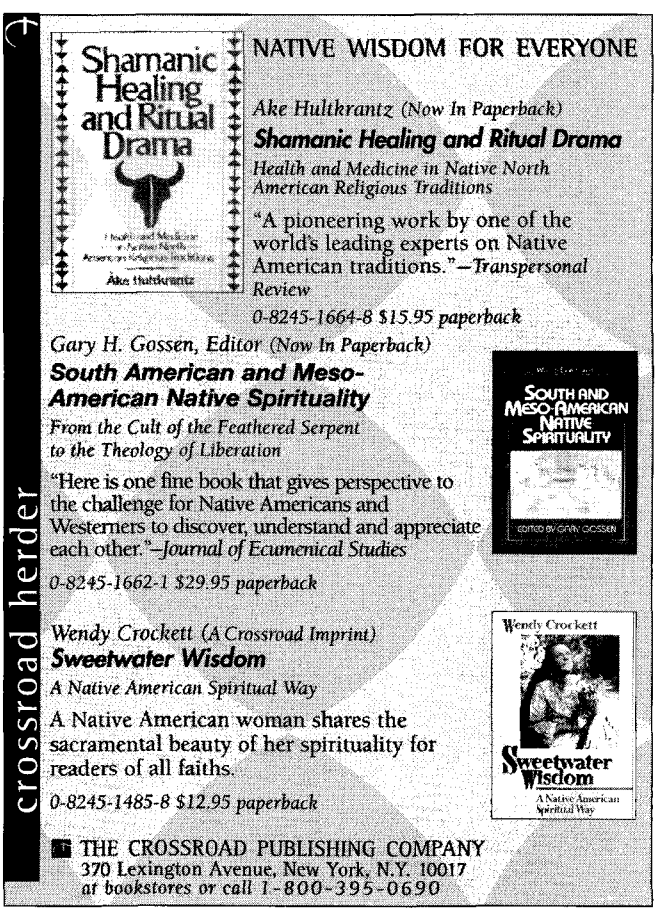
The climate in which these radical reconstructions thrive is a surfeit of undiscerning dogmatism. Numerous modern Christians feel an acute need to emancipate themselves from the oppression of fundamentalism, biblical literalism, anti-intellectualism, and authoritarianism: "They told me what to believe, but I don't buy it any more."

This form of reasoning and self-justification is well over two centuries old. In Rousseau's *Émile*, the curate from Savoy explains that "having been born into a church which decides everything, which permits no doubt whatever, the rejection of one point caused me to reject everything else, and the impossibility of accepting so many absurd decisions also deprived me of those that were not. By telling me, believe everything, they prevented me from believing anything, and I did not know where to stop."

But surely this is untrue. There *are* other options. There always are. Yet the self-emancipators usually imply—not always consciously—that the only form of faith available in the Christian churches today is the mindless faith they themselves have rejected or at least qualified beyond recognition. But such residual dogmatism on their part makes these reconstructionists unreliable teachers.

How about the Jesus Seminar and Its Findings?

Seminar, schmeminar. It uses a cookbook in hopes of doing botany. Some interesting stuff has emerged, but the picture of Jesus it presents is long on fancy, short on taste, and shorter on nourishment. Interestingly, while the Jesus Seminar creates lots of discussion (though often curiously uninformed), it gives little or no rise to prayer or conversion. Maybe the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Seminar is of interest to the religiously disenchanted—to the many who wish to give Christianity a quasi-informed good-by. But then again, the Seminar also appears to rely a lot on self-advertisement and free publicity, which I associate with entertainment. (Impertinent question: Who is putting up the money for the project?)

Now suppose I were asked to write a strictly factual piece about Jesus of Nazareth for *Who Is Who in Religion in the First Century*. I would decline. Why? While it is feasible to knock a concise essay together, it would certainly miss the *person* of Jesus. It would be boring as well, except, perhaps, for a few intriguing details. Jesus left no writings and we have no direct eyewitness accounts of his actions and speeches; all we can go by is what first-century people who believed in him have to say. And *they* worshiped him as the Son of God, in life, in death, in the New Life.

What I would rather do is write a piece on what *people around Jesus* thought of him. Jesus plainly provoked vigorous responses. From the Gospels we know that some Pharisees thought he was in cahoots with the Prince of Evil. Some of his own people tried to lock him up because he was thought to be out of his mind (Mark 3:21). He was made out to be a wine-bibber, an eater, a friend of the wrong kind of people. Some considered him a potential troublemaker—a "king of the Jews." Herod, who had reason to worry, imagined he might be John the Baptist come back to life; others thought the same, or figured he was Elijah, Jeremiah, or some other prophet. When Jesus asked his question, "Who do *you* say I am?" Peter answered he was the Messiah (Mark 8:29). Take your pick.

What would also be an interesting piece to write is an account of *what people have made of Jesus over the past nineteen or twenty centuries*. Over time, Jesus has continued to invite a torrent of interpretations and projections. In *Jesus through the Centuries*, Jaroslav Pelikan has shown the range of what Christians have made of him. Ever so many people (including great souls like Mahatma Gandhi and Dag Hammarskjöld) have found him humanly and religiously appealing; some have declared him a fraud. Then there is the whole in-between range. Jesus has been called a man so full of the Spirit that he was *equivalently* God's Son; he has been depicted as God dressed up in what *appeared* to be a human person; he has been called a magician trained in Egypt; some have maintained that in Jesus, the Word was indwelling a *soulless* human body (implying, of course, that Jesus had holiness in the bag and did not have any human choices to make). He has been called the Son of God not *really* affected by suffering; the scapegoat on whom God the Father, miserably caught between love and justice, *had to* take out his righteous wrath at sinful humanity. He has been depicted as the personification of true natural religion, as the embodiment of human God-consciousness at its best, as the romantic idealist who demonstrated that humanity at its springtime best is already united with God; as the teacher of that most noble morality: the primacy of love over justice and the infinite value of each individual human soul. He has been cast in the role of the prophet of the imminent end of the world, of the healer whose misguided zeal cut short his own noble efforts at offering compassion to the needy and the marginal, of the true leader of German Christians, of the true existentialist who acted freely out of authentic humanity alone and inspired others to do likewise, of a first-century cynic in the Palestinian mode, of a social zealot consistently taking the side of the poor and oppressed, of a revolutionary, of a universalistic Jewish teacher. Take your pick. Choose your own Jesus (otherwise he just might choose you).

A Brief Life of Jesus

Now suppose I was asked to write a brief life of Jesus that was both historically responsible and nourishment for faith. Here it is:

Jesus was a Galilean Jew from Nazareth, known as the son of Joseph and Mary, and a general mechanic by trade. When the Baptist began his preaching and baptizing ministry about A.D. 29, Jesus joined the crowd and sought baptism in the Jordan, showing a solidarity with sinners that was to startle early Christians, who firmly believed he was sinless. He began to go about from place to place, picking up followers as he went. His central theme was the actuality of

William John Watkins

I Find Wade's Footsteps Far Too Large to Walk

For Wade, 1963–93

I follow Wade, my son, as some do Christ.
What good I do is good done in his name.
I take his life as pattern for my life
and try to give as freely as he gave,

who almost at the moment that he died
waved off a nurse to tend a wardmate's pain
whose face he never saw. And I have tried
to love as he loved, but I try in vain.

I take my joy from when I feel him near,
my pain from doubt that he is here at all,
and though my death no longer makes me fear,
at death I fear I may not hear him call.

If, though I lived him day by day, he's gone,
the loss is less, and Hell's already done.

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God's Kingship in Israel, conveyed by his choice of the Twelve. He not only *taught* a new, unprecedented, urgent offer of salvation, but also *embodied* it (largely implicitly) in his very person. With everything he had and was, he called for total abandon to the living God and to God's new, mighty presence now; in so doing, he often defeated powers of evil. Not surprisingly, he was regarded as a wonderworker as well. He encountered people of every kind, in word and deed, in a bold, prophetic, at times even spectacular ministry of confrontation as well as compassion; in doing so, he was willing to set aside accepted forms of socio-religious discrimination. He assured known sinners of God's forgiveness and mercy, and did not avoid table fellowship with them as well as many others. He forcefully showed his disapproval of some less worshipful Temple practices. He challenged the definitive authority of the Law. All of this he did with an astonishing, authoritative freedom—suggestive of an original sense of mission.

No wonder he awakened long-cherished Jewish hopes. Could he be the prophet Elijah? The promised Son of David? The Messiah? Quite confusingly, however, his style implied an incomparable intimacy with God, in which he invited his followers to share (Matt. 11:25-27; 5:43-48). His person and ministry elicited faith, but not generally or for long. Miserably, he turned out to be altogether too much to take; he offended and scandalized many; he met with misinterpretation and rebuff. The fact that he ventured to do all this in a socio-economic environment made unstable by factionalism and political unrest made him politically suspect. That he insisted on taking his message to Jerusalem did not help him either, especially after entering the city in ragtag prophetic style. A few days later, he gently as well as prophetically accepted an extravagant gesture of love from a woman friend (she washed his feet with expensive perfume and dried them with her hair), interpreting it as an anticipation of his burial. In the end, he met with his disciples for a last supper, at which he showed them in prophetic sign and symbol that he was still holding out for God's kingship and was willing to give himself over—the servant of God and their servant. That same night, he was betrayed by one of the Twelve; at his arrest in Gethsemane, where he endured great anguish at the prospect of the inevitable, the others fled. Some women friends, who had followed him and taken care of some of his needs, followed his sufferings at a distance. Sentenced by Jewish authorities as a blasphemer, abandoned by almost all, desolate, and crucified by Roman soldiers as a traitor, he accepted the shame inflicted on him, and entrusted himself and his work to his dear Father's saving will. At the request of influential friends (and astonishingly for a crucified criminal), he got a decent, if hasty, burial, just before sundown on the eve of the Jewish Passover, most probably on April 7 in the year A.D. 30.

In retrospect, the treatment meted out to Jesus, who had "done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41), reveals what human beings have intuited across all cultures, namely, that our world is estranged from God's original purpose: "He came into his own, yet those who were his own did not welcome him" (John 1:11). We yearn for a lost innocence, yet we are misguided in the pursuit of it. Enslaved by "the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 3:5), and prepared to kill to save our lives, we human beings are hell-bent on judgment, and resolved to champion what we consider right by overpowering those weaker than ourselves, by discriminating against those we consider outsiders, and by justifying ourselves by claims to moral autonomy. Both the just and the unjust will repay evil with evil, and let the Holy and Just One be traded for a murderer (Acts 3:14).

Put to this test (Matt. 4:1–11), Jesus clung to God, whom he called *Abba*—"Father dear" (Mark 14:36). He did not make common cause with sin, nor even did he "resist the evil one" (Matt. 5:39) or turn against anyone in judgment (John 3:17; 12:47). Instead, he deliberately took on, absorbed, and outsuffered the sinful violence inflicted on him and the shame of the cross—a form of execution reserved for foreign invaders, traitors, and slaves. Willingly taking responsibility for our sins, "he carried them in his body to the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24). Treating his enemies as neighbors even while suffering rejection and death at their hands, he remained faithful to his mission as *God's agent of salvation*, determined to let nothing get lost, but rather to bring it home, alive forever, to God (*see* John 6:37–40).

In this way, Jesus revealed a God who is "for us" (Rom. 8:31), "reconciling the world to himself, not holding their sins against them" (2 Cor. 5:19)—a God who "shows his love for us by having Christ die for us while we were still sinners" (Rom. 5:8). In the risen Christ, therefore, "we have an advocate with the Father,...and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2). Consequently, Christians live "with their eyes fixed on Jesus, who sums up faith from start to finish" (Heb. 12:2), and who leads them on the path of long suffering he trod himself, to where he lives now and forever—"to the throne of mercy" (Heb. 4:6).

A Piece of Advice

We live in a world of religious and theological distrust. When you have read this essay, you may find yourself wondering why the author has left out this or that point you consider essential or included one you consider debatable. Please do not think from such omissions and inclusions that the author thinks the point you would have liked to see (or not to see) in print is unimportant (or indubitable), or (worse) that he completely disagrees with you, or, for that matter, with the Great Christian Tradition or the *magisterium*. After all, this piece is only a start. Besides, authors are only authors; they have their own limited "take" on the things they discuss. There is so much to Our Lord Jesus Christ that this little essay couldn't possibly contain everything—not even all the essentials. Nor could it possibly resolve every doubt. □

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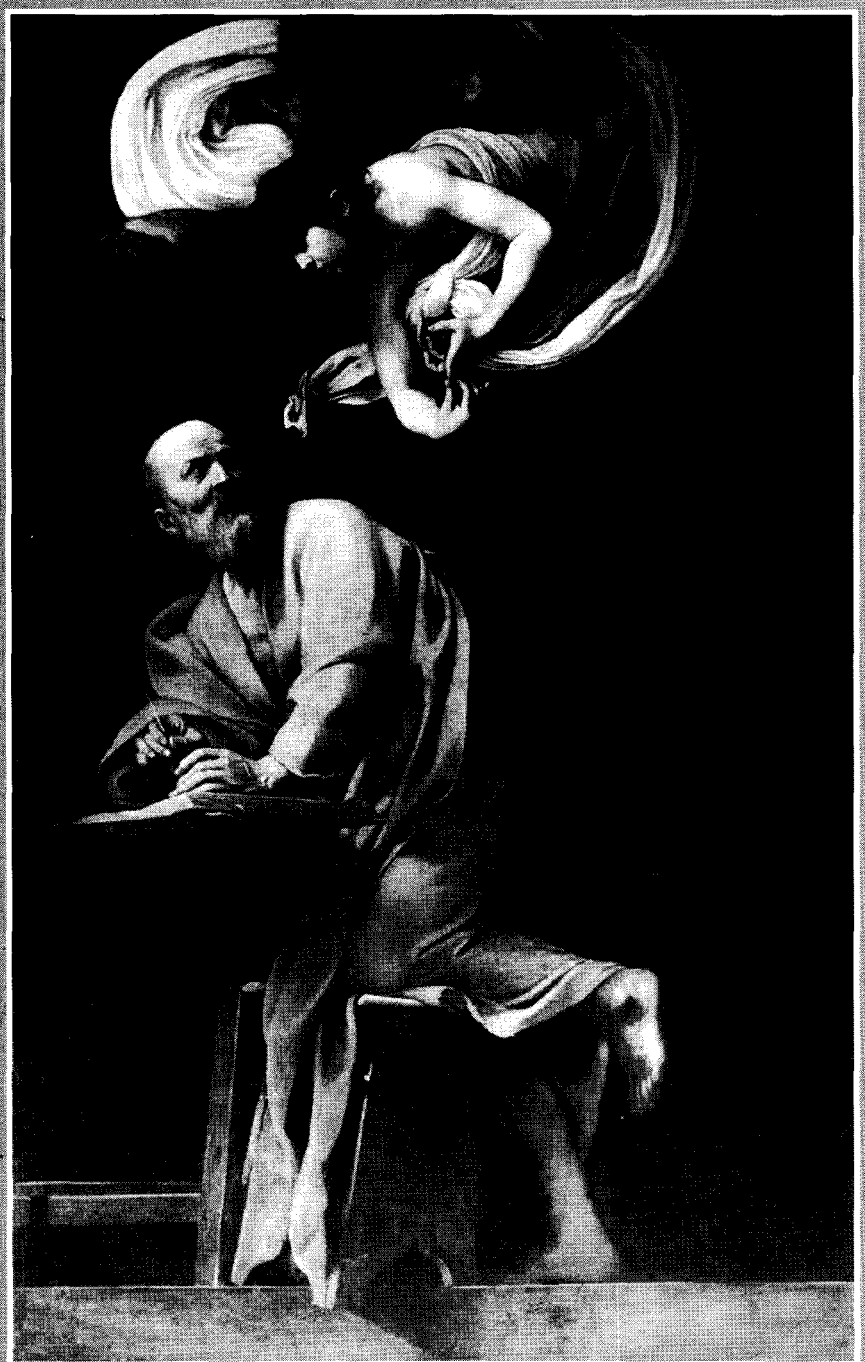

A MESSAGE FROM CARAVAGGIO

A Symposium on Revelation

LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON • KATHLEEN NORRIS
SANDRA M. SCHNEIDERS • DONALD SENIOR • SUSAN A. ROSS

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As the controversy surrounding the Jesus Seminar suggests, the historical-critical methods employed by modern biblical scholars have raised profound questions about the nature of revelation. Is Scripture a human product, or divine—or is this either/or altogether too simple? What sense can we make of revelation given all the human and historical circumstances we now know went into Scripture's composition? We need a new—or renewed—understanding of revelation's power and truth.

Toward this end, we have asked a handful of contributors to reflect on the idea of revelation, and to do so by reference to Caravaggio's great painting, *Saint Matthew and the Angel* (*circa* 1603), in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. What can it tell us about revelation? Does this painting give us a window on revelation's nature?

In *Saint Matthew and the Angel*, Caravaggio gives us a man of flesh and blood, with throbbing feet and a weathered face. And he gives us drama. According to a medieval legend, Matthew's Gospel had been dictated to him by an angel. But in Caravaggio's presentation of this story, it is possible to see in Matthew's expression a kind of resistance to his otherworldly messenger. Is this pride? Or is it, perhaps, fidelity to revelation's ongoing truth? BERNARD G. PRUSAK

Bernard G. Prusak is Commonweal*'s 1996-97 editorial intern.*

Luke Timothy Johnson

Luke Timothy Johnson is the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University. He is the author of The Real Jesus *(HarperSanFrancisco).*

Caravaggio captures the truth of revelation in much the same way that Scripture itself does, not by providing a blueprint of its mechanics, but by constructing an imaginative space in which the hard surface of things is given depth and shadow so that the wing and whirl of another more profound intelligence, more urgent love, more compelling power, may somehow have room to move.

The living God who creates all at every moment and presses on all creation seeking to disclose the truth that lies beneath the contingency of things, this God cannot be contained directly and surely not adequately by any creature, and so must be disclosed in such moments as this: in a flash of light in a darkened room that one glimpses—while rising from study and putting away the laborious pen—over one's left shoulder, so that one is twisted and unbalanced and anxious, and perhaps a bit embarrassed, trying to catch the urgent whisper of this alarmingly well-fleshed and apparently adolescent messenger from beyond whose ears and fingers are so distractingly red.

The critical study of Scripture has enabled us to appreciate just how fragile and partial, embodied and particular, mediated and dialogical, all revelation must be, not because of a deficiency either in God's self-disclosure or in human receptivity, but because the fragile and the partial, the embodied and the particular, the slow and sometimes unsteady process of mediation and dialogue is at the heart of the mystery of God's shaping, sustaining, saving, and sanctifying presence to creation.

Coming to see the profoundly human character of Scripture does not detract from revelation—just the opposite. It frees us from the fantasy of a false completeness, of a message from God wrapped in eternal verities and stamped with doubt-free postage, and frees us also for an appreciation of the way in which every odd encounter and every ordinary routine can be a visitation to which we must attend.

Take the painting as a parable. We can choose to observe only the surface representation and conclude that Caravaggio, unschooled in higher criticism, was wrong about the process of Gospel composition. Matthew, we reply, was not an angel's scribe but the head of a scribal school that edited Mark's Gospel in order to meet the needs facing his church. We despise the painting for not meeting our standards of historical accuracy. And nothing is revealed to us, for we have not known the painting as an artistic rendering, but have twisted it to our own impoverished epistemology.

Alternatively, we can imagine as the painter imagined, see as the painter saw, and can almost touch the furrowed brow of Matthew, the awed attention, the effort to comprehend what always escapes full comprehension. And with senses so alive and imagination so engaged, we can both see in the ancient texts and hear in the voices of adolescent boys the truth of God's presence seeking an opening for a space in our hearts.

Kathleen Norris

Kathleen Norris's most recent book is Cloister Walk *(Riverhead). She lives in Lemmon, South Dakota.*

The best definition of revelation that I know is found in the great liturgical scholar Aidan Kavanaugh's potent book, *On Liturgical Theology*: "It was a Presence, not faith, which drew Moses to the burning bush. And what happened there was a revelation, not a seminar." Caravaggio's painting reveals an or-

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dinary human being experiencing the unknown and unknowable, the mystery we call divine. And Matthew answers with his whole body: His brow wrinkles, his hand and leg muscles tense up. This is what we might call inspiration—not a vague, dreamy state in which a greeting-card angel appears like the Blue Fairy in *Pinocchio* to grant us our dearest desire, but an attentive response to God's presence.

Matthew is captured at the most intense moment of inspiration, when the words demand to flow as if from the heart and mind, down the arm and to the hand, from the pen onto the page. It is a moment recognizable to any writer; only later, upon reflection, might one begin to see that one has not progressed immediately from ignorance to revelation, but recognize that the new words have coalesced out of stories and circumstances that have been a part of one's life for some time. Angels do not dictate poems, or even holy Scripture. Human language is limited, flawed, conditional. Yet it is the way God chooses to speak to us. The picture tells a story of encounter, of words incarnating, becoming flesh.

Sandra M. Schneiders

Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., is professor of New Testament studies and spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology and the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley. She is the author of The Revelatory Text *(HarperSanFrancisco).*

If we "read" Caravaggio's painting literally (which is precisely how a painting should not be viewed), we would conclude that biblical inspiration means divine dictation, directly or through a messenger such as an angel, of the content of the biblical book. Modern biblical scholars, for good historical reasons, would reject such an explanation of the origins of the Bible. A clue, however, that this painting is not an attempt to give a literal account of inspiration is the "unrealistic" position of Saint Matthew: No one writes a book half-standing at one's desk! The dramatic tension between Matthew and the angel suggests that two energies are in dialogue here: the very human evangelist with workbench and writing materials, and the winged messenger from the divine realm.

Historical criticism can tell us a great deal about the human processes of composition that produced the biblical books. But we have to turn to theology for reflection on the interaction of divine and human agency in the production of the sacred literature which Christians regard as privileged witness to the divine revelation which occurred in the history of Israel, Jesus, and the early church.

The term "inspiration" is a code word for an entire field of theological discussion about the special character of the Bible as word of God in human words. It is crucial to distinguish between the church's constant faith in the *fact that* the Bible is both inspired by God and a fully human product, and the various *theories* that have been developed about

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how the divine-human cooperation occurred which makes this book unique. The situation is not unlike confessing *that* Jesus is fully divine and fully human without ever being able to explain the *how* of the Incarnation.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that the church claimed the Bible as a special witness to divine revelation first, and later explained this claim in terms of inspiration (as it first recognized the revelation of God in Jesus and gradually developed the doctrine of Incarnation). In other words, it was not some objective criterion that could be observed in this text and not in others that led the church to recognize the Bible as inspired; it was because the church recognized this book as its sacred text that the church claimed it was inspired. This suggests that the statement "the Bible is inspired" is not a scientific or historical statement but a faith statement. And it is not possible (or necessary) to prove the truth of this kind of statement.

The real question is: What does the church intend to say by the faith statement that the Bible is inspired? Essentially, this statement is a claim that this book, approached in faith, is somehow a privileged mediator of the encounter with God that we call revelation. Caravaggio's painting captures well a dimension of that encounter. There is a dynamic tension between the human and the divine in the experience of revelation. Because the divine is mediated in and through the human, there is always the ambivalence of our yearning for and our resistance to the divine. Like Matthew in the painting, we grasp the pen of our human initiative even as we respond to an initiative more powerful than our own.

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Donald Senior

Donald Senior, C.P., is professor of New Testament at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. His book The Gospel of Matthew *was recently published by Abingdon Press.*

For twenty-five years, a copy of *Saint Matthew and the Angel* has hung on the wall of my office, a gift from my parents when I completed my dissertation on Matthew's Gospel.

I love this painting. It portrays the evangelist, listening carefully and perhaps even nervously, trying to catch every word as the angel dictates the Gospel, ticking off points on angelic fingers as if Matthew were a stenographer. Perhaps Matthew is in awe, too, as the Gospel's majestic story of Jesus falls into place—from the wondrous events of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and his great sermon to the crowds on a Galilean mountain, to the heart-clutching events of death and resurrection in Jerusalem and, from another Galilean mountain, the final commission sending the disciples into the world.

For the artist, Matthew's Gospel, along with the rest of the Bible, was inspired and inspiring. And so the angel, emblematic of God's Spirit, dictates to the evangelist. Even if our theological sophistication outstrips Caravaggio's painting, this fundamental faith assertion remains: Scripture is God's inspired word, normative for Christian tradition as no other texts can claim to be.

And yet Caravaggio's portrait does not reveal the whole truth. Matthew is not simply a scribe, taking divine dictation. Perhaps the artist sensed this—he makes Matthew such a compelling figure. The man who earned that lined face filled with character doesn't strike you as the kind of person content simply to write things down. There is more to inspiration than that. The Spirit that led Matthew to compose his Gospel was present in a host of other people and circumstances that shaped this story of Jesus. Ultimately we have to reach back to the first generation of disciples who listened to Jesus' words and witnessed his messianic deeds. Then there were all of the catechists, parents, community leaders, mystics, and prophets in the developing Christian community who handed on these stories about Jesus and gave them new layers of understanding and depth. And of course there was Matthew's own community with its particular circumstances, perhaps located in Antioch in Syria, perhaps a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians, trying to move forward in history, faithful to Jesus but also encountering unanticipated turns and tensions in the journey. And then we have Matthew himself (or an anonymous Christian author?) who draws together his sources (Mark's Gospel and a collection of sayings?) and tells with new freshness and majesty the story of Jesus—a story so effective, so penetrating, that the whole church would never let it slip from its hands.

Whatever metaphysical explanation we attempt to give for the process of inspiration, it must extend not simply to the evangelist who wrote the Gospel but to the entire cast of Christians who lovingly and faithfully handed on that tradition prior to the writing of the Gospel and left on it the imprint of their faith. In the shadows, behind Matthew and his angelic muse, stands this unseen chorus of Spirit-guided Christians, our ancestors in faith.

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Susan A. Ross

Susan A. Ross is associate professor of theology at Loyola University, Chicago. She is currently writing a book on women and sacraments.

What strikes me about this painting: Saint Matthew seems to be caught off-guard; the book is half off the table, the bench (which is for sitting) is tipping over as he half-kneels on it. Matthew looks as if he had been in the middle of something else, and then rushed to his table, not even taking the time to sit down, sharpen his pencils (or quills), and do all of the things that writers do to forestall actually putting pen (or quills) to paper. The angel is definitely on a mission, already enumerating exactly what needs to be said. Matthew doesn't look happy with this whole arrangement. He is listening, to be sure, and his quill is poised, but he's ready to run.

What does this say about revelation: It's not neat and predictable; it doesn't come on schedule; we're not ready for it. Perhaps Matthew would have preferred to be sitting in a comfortable chair, puffing on his pipe, calmly reminiscing about (and perhaps embroidering too) the old stories about Jesus that he is preparing to commit to paper. I know I would. But the angel comes with the *urgency* of this message: "First this, then this, then this...and make sure to get the genealogy straight!" This painting seems to be saying that the power of God's word comes and grabs us, even when we'd most like to think the whole thing through carefully, prepare an outline, do a draft, run it by a few friends for review—but the angel, who is God's presence among us, will have none of this.

I'm spending the year on sabbatical, writing, and I've perfected innumerable ways of avoiding facing the blank page by doing more and more reading, more research, more outlines. I identify with Matthew, who seems to find the writing process tortuous. And while I make no claims that my own attempts to communicate something of the Christian message are on any par with the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, I think we're struggling with some of the same things: the need to listen, the need to attend to the writing *now*, and perhaps most especially the need to trust that, despite our reluctance, our lack of preparedness and confidence, we are God's vessels, God's media of revelation. This is the paradoxical dimension of revelation: that it is from God—whom we imagine accompanied by angels on flowing wings of glory—but that it is expressed in and by the frail, reluctant people who are its recipients. □

SCREEN

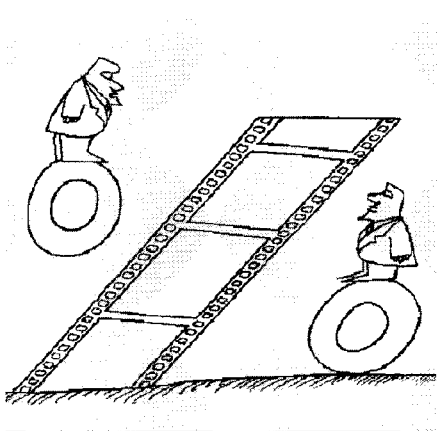
Richard Alleva

DIRECTORS AS WRITERS

Beresford's 'Road' & Lumet's 'Night'

Bruce Beresford's *Paradise Road* is about the struggle of female prisoners-of-war—Brits, Dutch, Australians, a few Americans and Asians, and one German Jew—to stay alive and to remain civilized in a Japanese POW camp after the fall of Singapore in 1942. Before the film is ten minutes under way, it becomes clear that scriptwriter Beresford understands director Beresford very well, caters to his strengths, incites his visual power, and, when need be, keeps out of his way.

Beresford writes good, flavorsome, pointed dialogue. Example: When Japanese officers tempt some of the starving women to prostitute themselves for food and softer living conditions, and one of them steps forward in capitulation, the unofficial leader of the women (Glenn Close) intercepts her by saying, "Don't be *absurd*." Obviously Close could have uttered something like, "Don't lower yourself," but "absurd" is the *mot juste*. To sell one's body for the sake of preserving one's body is for her unthinkable, impossible, absurd. One adjective encapsulates a code of honor.



But though Beresford has done skillful adaptations of plays such as *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Breaker Morant*, he has never been a photographer of talking heads. He continues to write—with images—long after the dialogue stops. And, as viewers of *Black Robe* know, this filmmaker has a pronounced talent for visualizing the extremes of cruelty and compassion. In *Paradise Road*, this talent is unstintingly on tap in service to the movie's theme: beauty as preservation and certification of sanity and civilization in the face of unremitting cruelty.

The rigors of the POW camp are searingly presented. Always we are kept aware that any moment of respite from labor—a quick nap, a brief chat—can be canceled by blows or much worse. Beresford can wrest horrible beauty from the most egregious sights. When an Asian woman is burnt alive for illicitly obtaining quinine for the sick, her body, for one heartstopping instant, seems to plunge out from the flames like a surfer riding a wave. But the director refuses to end this excruciating scene on a note

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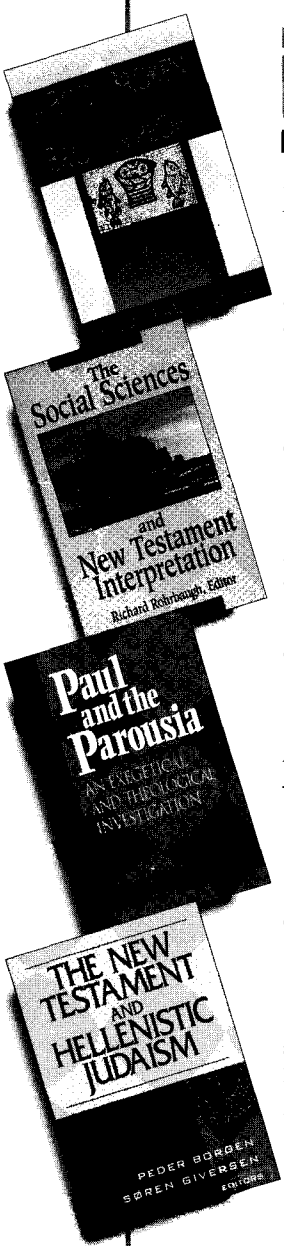
of mere shock. Our last sight of the execution is an extreme long shot with the camera looking down on the camp and taking in the beauty of the surrounding Sumatran landscape. The very gorgeousness of nature rebukes the cruelty of mankind.

But beauty in this film does more than rebuke. Assisted by a missionary friend who's had musical training, Close drafts several of the inmates into performing works by Elgar, Dvorák, Ravel, and other composers. This enterprise could have been portrayed entirely as an example of British pluck, for so it is, but both Beresford and Close insist on much more. Close, conducting her "vocal orchestra" (not a choir, as she firmly insists), seems to sculpt the lovely sounds in the air with her hands. The faces of the singing women are so intent on the precision the music needs that we feel these captives—trammeled by filth and brute force—have momentarily attained transcendence. Some guards, rushing up as usual to break up any assemblage, stop in their tracks as the first notes of the first concert are sounded. These brutalized and brutalizing men have been virtually smitten by beauty and are soon sitting on the ground to drink in more of the voluptuousness. After witnessing so much cruelty and squalor, we too drink it in. We too are smitten.

The actresses in this film, without exception, respond to Beresford's direction with the same devotion that the prisoners bring to the music. Of all leading American film actresses, Glenn Close has turned out to be the best steward of her own talent, finding role after role in the last decade that forced her to take talent-stretching risks. (Meryl Streep, an even greater actress than Close, has had no such luck.) Close's almost too perfectly chiseled, high-cheekboned face, a bit given to smugness in her earlier roles, here believably takes on the radiance of a woman battling hatred and death with discipline and love. Elizabeth Spriggs, a reliable portrayer of stuffed shirts on the British stage for three decades, delicately limns one more, but this time with a heart embedded in the stuffing. Frances McDormand amazed me with her portrayal of an ambiguous German doctor, blending compassion and steeliness as she did in *Fargo* but with an acrid flavor of *Mitteleuropa* that can't come easily to an American actress. If it is to be regretted that some of the supporting roles are insufficiently written, at least the actresses in them make us want to know these women better. And a special accolade must go to the Asian actor (alas, I don't have his name) who plays the camp interpreter. Without much help from the script, he makes it clear that his character is a humane intellectual pressed into abetting a savagery that every cell in his body knows is wrong. This performance is an example of the actor as writer.

And Bruce Beresford is an example of the director as poet. Though a master of spectacle (an aerial attack on a transport ship is an inducement to fibrillation), he is really at his best using the resources of film to impinge upon the nearly inexpressible. When the women are being driven from their camp to a more remote one in the face of Mac-



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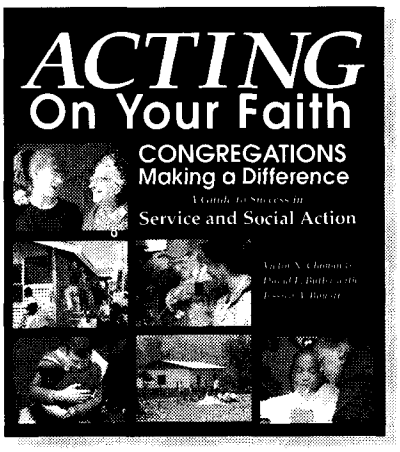

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Arthur's advance, their convoy passes the Japanese officers' quarters, in front of which, taking lunch, are those former camp inmates who accepted the bribery of relative comfort and are now concubines. They look dazed and alienated from themselves. But does Beresford cross-cut from concubines to resolute captives in order to italicize the shame of the former? No. Instead, he overlaps shots of one group with the other and merges the two. The meaning of this? I offer only my interpretation, for this scene has the rich ambiguity of poetry. No moral parity is suggested; clearly the women who refused prostitution made the harder, better choice. (You can see this acknowledged in the faces of women in both groups.) Nevertheless, there is a ghostly sense of sisterhood here. All have been abused, all in some sense manhandled, and all long for escape and home. Now they all meet for the first time in nearly two years and some for the very last time on earth. Since they cannot physically embrace, Beresford magically, cinematically, lets them mingle. This is film artistry of a high order, executed with finesse and informed by compassion.

Sidney Lumet's new movie is called *Night Falls on Manhattan*, but it's really just *Rainclouds Scudding over Gotham*. Like *Paradise Road*, this is a movie written by a director who usually labors on the screenplays of others, and once again the scriptwriter knows exactly what his directorial *alter ego* wants. Only trouble is, he can't make the delivery. The staging of this film is incisive and hot, the material diffuse and tepid.

You would never guess it from the opening half-hour in which director Lumet is at the zenith of his powers. The arrest of a drug dealer is bungled; cops are killed or wounded; the press is hungry and the D.A. feeds it by having the murderer prosecuted by the son of one of the downed policemen. Lumet serves up such a blazing canvas of street violence and political conniving that you could swear Victor Hugo had been reincarnated as a filmmaker. But the trial, which should have been the centerpiece of *Night*, is wrapped up in a few minutes of screen time and the remainder of the film is devoted to our young prosecutor unraveling the facts behind the shooting. And what does he discover? Surprise! Police corruption! And these discoveries unfold in a series of scenes distinguished only by dialogue that is imitation Clifford Odets ("You want clean hands? Become a priest!"), and revelations that fizzle or get qualified out of existence (the hero's father may be a dirty cop, then he isn't, then he is, but only a little bit dirty and for an honorable reason). Lumet's last movie on the same subject, *Q&A*, was flawed but held together and was galvanized by its villain, Nick Nolte at the top of his form, who embodied and dramatized police corruption. There's no such compelling figure here, so the central evil is merely verbalized.

And though Lumet's eye for composition and action is better than ever, his instinct for choosing and guiding actors (usually his strong suit) has gone awry. Richard Dreyfuss is perfect as a liberal gadfly lawyer, but how could Dreyfuss not be perfect in such a role? Andy Garcia is smudgy as the hero; often he doesn't seem to know where the true climax of a scene is and so simply explodes at random. Ron Liebman is obnoxious as the D.A., but that's not the same thing as playing an obnoxious man vividly. Ian Holm struggles to some good effect with the role of Garcia's father, but he doesn't seem comfortable with his Irish-American accent, and this detracts from what comes close to being a fine performance. The lack of any accent, of any vocal flavor whatsoever, renders Lena Olin's performance as Garcia's lover eerily empty. This wonderful Swedish actress has so purified her diction that she doesn't come across as Swedish-American or Anglo-American or Anything-American. She's the Shiksa from Another Planet. The best performance is by the dauntingly named Sheik Mahmud Bey who, as the killer, is like a bomb ticking quietly. But by losing this character too soon, the movie disarms itself. □

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Celia Wren

THE BROADWAY MUSICAL

'Titanic,' 'Jekyll & Hyde' & 'Play On!'

In a burst of optimism before the Tony Awards deadline, Broadway sprang forward with a song on its lips and pride in its heart. Six weeks saw the opening of eight musicals, including *The Life*, a portrait of prostitution in Times Square in the 1980s; *Steel Pier*, about a dance marathon in the 1930s; and a revival of *Candide*, Leonard Bernstein's scored version of the Voltaire story.

The congestion led the entertainment weekly *Variety* to speculate darkly on the economic viability of "Broadway's crowded waters." It seems appropriate, therefore, that two of the musicals entering with the most advance publicity have toyed with the theme of *hubris*.

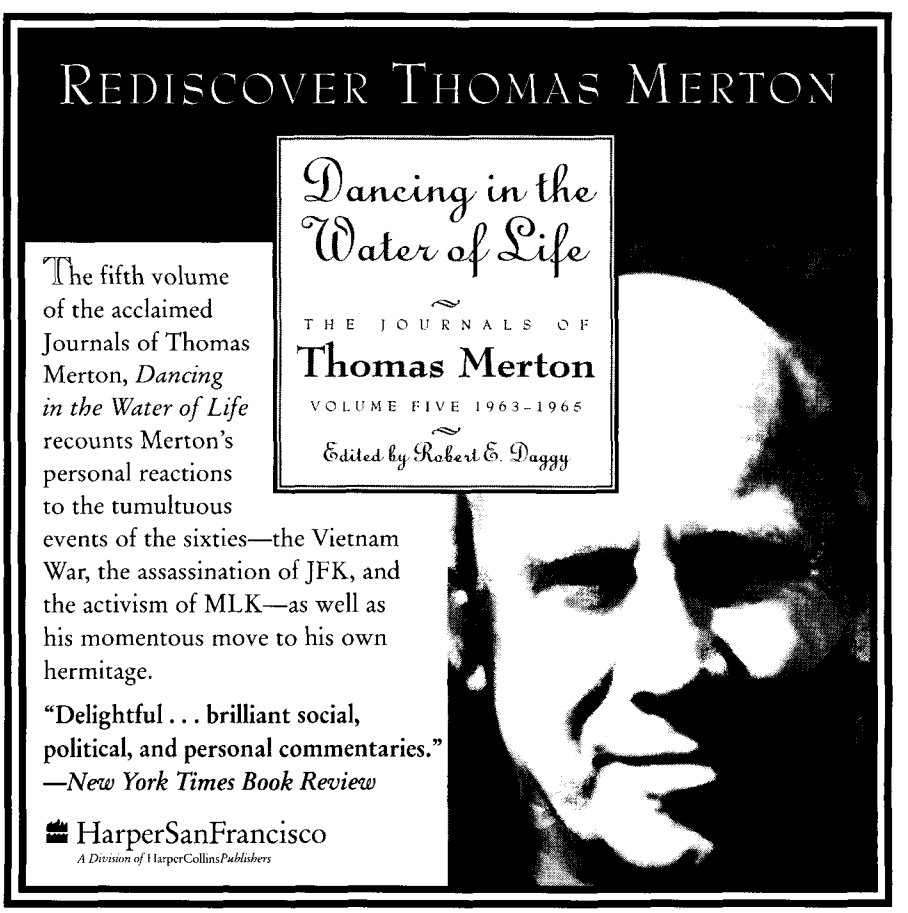
Jekyll & Hyde, an operatic version of the Robert Louis Stevenson novella, drapes a lurid Victorian London behind its hero/villain, an arrogant scientist with the morals of Raskolnikov and the creepy sex appeal of a rock star. *Titanic*—yes, a musical about the maritime disaster—also emphasizes human ambition: Characters who rashly praise the ship as "a poem and the perfection of physical engineering" learn to their cost that they were wrong. Interestingly, both plays contain variants on a single line. "What makes you think you have the right to play God?" an irate hospital trustee protests, reining in one of Dr. Jekyll's unethical medical experiments. And the *Titanic*'s designer asks its captain the same question when it's time to allot the lifeboats. (Titanic succeeded in garnering five Tony Awards. Jekyll & Hyde did not win any.)

Both musicals push issues to the front, perhaps partly to deflect a certain type of reproach. Ever since the onslaught of Andrew Lloyd Webber extravaganzas, with their take-no-prisoners special-effects, critics have accused Broadway musicals of being more spectacle than theater. Not that the two genres have ever been completely separate: Even the loopy French avant-gardist Antonin Artaud, whose idea of spectacle ran to "cries, groans, apparitions..., hieroglyphic characters, ritual costumes, manikins ten feet high representing the beard of King Lear," was on to something when he observed, in the 1930s, that spectacle was integral to the theater's magic.

What critics of Broadway extravaganzas condemn is the tendency of producers and theater-goers to rate technology and "production values" more highly than the thought or vision that the play expresses. Lobbing a few concepts across the orchestra pit, in the manner of *Titanic* and *Jekyll & Hyde*, staves off such censure, while allowing the audience members to flatter themselves they have procured a little instruction with their entertainment.

In fact, a veneer of philosophy provides excellent camouflage for the kind of voyeuristic thrills these two productions supply. *Titanic* offers paint-by-numbers conflicts to pass time until the ship sinks. When the formidable Charlotte Cardoza (Becky Ann Baker), dressed in hot pink spangles, invades the men's smoking room and demands admittance to their card game, we realize that the old world order is giving way to the new. When a chantey sung by the stoker (Brian d'Arcy James) in the gloomy boiler room introduces the Astors and friends dining in the first class saloon, we understand the absurdity of class.

But it is impossible to care how these social disparities affect the play's underdeveloped characters, like the starry-eyed Irish emigrants who fall in love in third class, or the cuddly Mr. and Mrs. Isador Straus (Larry Keith and Alma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Cuervo), last seen drinking champagne on the upper deck. The production points a big ironic arrow at passengers and crew not because they are unusual or complex, but because they are playing cards or falling in love as if they had their whole life ahead of them, *and they're on the* Titanic!

After intermission, irony darkens to the titillating horror of a '70s' disaster movie. The set's different levels, representing the various parts of the ship, cant ever more steeply as the vessel is sucked into the depths. This mechanical wizardry permits one interesting moment, when the ship's morose, baldheaded designer, Thomas Andrews (Michael Cerveris), doomed but suddenly inspired, starts sketching other projects as a grand piano crashes down on him.

A tilting set, however, is no substitute for engaging dialogue, interesting characters, and memorable music, all of which are in shorter supply here than lifeboats. The tragedy we spy on is singularly unmoving: We look at it, but cannot get involved. To experience the *frisson* without splurging on a ticket, one might simply enter the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre's box office: The names of the *Titanic* passengers have been inscribed on the walls, annotated with asterisks, to show who died.

While *Titanic* fights for breathing space on the Great White Way, *Jekyll & Hyde* has already won the first few rounds. Through out-of-town productions and two advance recordings, this feverish melodrama, with music by Frank Wildhorn and book and lyrics by Leslie Bricusse, has acquired a cult following and a national fan club.

Obviously the musical's creators have hit upon the right mixture of music, violence (serial killing, sexual torture, a bishop who is burned alive, etc.), and pseudoprofundity. Certainly the ballad-heavy score, which is frequently stirring, matches the mood of hysterical gothicism. A set that seems in constant motion—scrims, scaffolding, smoke, a vial-infested laboratory that slides forward, an intermittent backdrop of the brooding Thames—intensifies the phantasmagoric atmosphere.

Whereas Stevenson's story kept an eerie silence on the subject of Edward Hyde's specific misdeeds, the musical is explicit to the point of absurdity, giving Jekyll/Hyde (the swashbuckling Robert Cuccioli) two love interests—one madonna, one whore (Christiane Noll and Linda Eder, both possessed of angelic voices)—and following him zealously as he stalks victims through the gloom-shrouded streets.

But Bricusse's real innovation is to splice every fragment of possible subtext right into the lyrics. Scuttling through the shadows, a chorus of the rag-clad, downtrodden poor sings, over and over, that "it's all a façade," as though we were too stupid to understand the hypocrisy of Victorian morals. Other mammoth themes—the war between good and evil, the rivalry between the public and the private self, the conflict between end and means—get thrust forward just as blatantly.

This heavy-handed candor deprives us of the opportunity to think through the issues ourselves. With no need to interpret the production, and thus to participate in it, spectators are reduced to voyeurs. Stevenson's story, vague about the struggle for Jekyll's soul, invites us to see his strife within ourselves. The musical puts the contest center stage: At the evening's climax, Cuccioli repeatedly shifts back and forth from Jekyll to Hyde in a split second, altering his posture (upright for Jekyll, stooping for Hyde), his voice (higher for Jekyll, lower for Hyde), and even his hair (slicked back for Jekyll, unruly for Hyde), synchronous with a pulsing spotlight. The effect is striking, but it narrows the focus to a single man with sensational problems rather than suggesting the world.

An early casualty of Broadway's musical melee was the ebullient *Play On!* (book by Cheryl L. West), which set Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in 1940s' Harlem, and let its characters express themselves through old favorites by Duke Ellington. Though some scenes had a forced quality, and the connecting story was a threadbare excuse for the songs, the personalities—like the stately composer Duke (Carl Anderson), or the skittish *femme fatale* Lady Liv (Tonya Pinkins)—were more distinct, more human, and vastly more appealing than anyone treading the boards of *Titanic* or haunting *Jekyll & Hyde*. Even the scenic design—a color-saturated Art Deco cityscape—had a consistency and logic the other productions lack. *Play On!* had no pretentions and much cheerfulness—no wonder it closed. When musicals can pontificate about human misfortune, why should they bother to sing and dance? □

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Summer reading

Suzanne Keen

Suzanne Keen writes frequently for Commonweal *and teaches English literature at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia.*

In this season of book-recommending, the titanic power of Oprah Winfrey has rendered some highbrow taste makers a mite peevish. Most of the friendly souls who yearly share their reading lists with us welcome the sight of a paperback fiction best-seller list in which serious literary fiction outnumbers the Grishams and Higgins Clarks. Here and there, however, in the quarterlies and in the academy, I catch the tone of beach house owners in a bad hurricane season: Oprah's blowing us away, again! I'm not with the excited meteorologists on this one, but content to wobble out on the sea wall in a slicker, shouting into the wind: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (NAL/Dutton, $5.99, 337 pp.), read by tens and maybe hundreds of thousands of people this year? Hit us again, Oprah!

If Oprah reminds us that "serious" literary fiction can be fun and stimulating enough to be read eagerly by large numbers of Americans, she also endorses books that are readable and engrossing. In that spirit, I proffer the following suggestions.

If you caught "Ivanhoe" on TV recently, you may have felt an impulse to renew your acquaintance with Walter Scott. *Old Mortality*, which can be found in Penguin and Oxford ($11.95, 616 pp.) paperbacks, or in a used bookstore, makes a great place to start. My husband urges me to tell you to hang in there for the first thirty pages or so—Scott's great war story and study of the character of religious enthusiasm doesn't falter once the action starts. *Old Mortality* sets the standard for historical fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: It has gripping adventure, brushes with the famous, and complex characters.

If you especially enjoy historical fiction, I would also recommend two more recent novels, Jane Smiley's *The Greenlanders* (Fawcett; $14, 608 pp.), and Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* (Norton, $12.95, 629 pp.). The novels (about medieval Greenland and the slave trade, respectively) have very little in common except for their compelling accounts of the way humans think about racial otherness. Both conjure up long-gone worlds in their vivid evocation of the details and materials of everyday life: a slave ship, a red dress, a carved spoon. Their elegaic intensity obliterates any of the whiff of the formidable research that must have gone into their composition.

Though it isn't strictly speaking a historical novel, Seamus Deane's wonderful *Reading in the Dark* (Knopf, $23, 245 pp.) brings a poet's lyrical gifts to the task of capturing a closer historical period, of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Booker Prize committee really missed the boat on this short-listed novel, Deane's first full-length work of fiction. Perhaps because it superficially resembles a recent Irish-authored Booker winner, Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (in both books a little boy discovers imperfectly concealed truths about his family), the committee honored an altogether less impressive book, Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (Random House, $12, 294 pp.). I can't discuss the plot of *Reading in the Dark* without spoiling the surprises upon which the novel depends, but many of the lyrical vignettes that make up the story made my hair stand on end. This novel is worth buying in hardcover, if you can't find it in a library.

If I were putting together a reading list with the theme "Family Secrets," I would certainly include not only Seamus Deane's book, but Gloria Naylor's best novel, *Mama Day* (Random House, $12, 320 pp.). Set mostly on an imaginary island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia (but belonging to neither state), *Mama Day* tells the story of the descendents of Sapphira Wade, a slave woman and sorceress. Naylor masterfully creates a raft of memorable characters, and imagines a world with its own history, customs, folkways, charms, and dangers. If you have been following Oprah's

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reading list, *Mama Day* makes a stimulating companion to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

To cap off a summer of reading either historical fiction, or novels about family secrets, you might enjoy a book that fits both categories, and which happens to be one of the funniest novels I have read in a long time: Louis de Bernières's *Corelli's Mandolin* (Vintage, $13, 437 pp.). The lives of Greek villagers and Italian soldiers during World War II provide the material for excruciating comedy and poignant ironies. This novel may have gone out of print, but I found copies for sale at the amazing internet bookstore, Amazon Books (http://www.amazon.com). It is also available on audio cassette, and, if you have a commute that wouldn't be rendered life-endangering by paralyzing bouts of laughter, *Corelli's Mandolin* would make a fine choice for a book on tape.

If the mere thought of starting a novel makes you feel faint with exhaustion and guilty in advance for not finding time to finish it, perhaps a slighter volume would appeal. I thoroughly enjoyed perusing *The Poetry of Jane Austen and the Austen Family* (University of Iowa Press, $12.95, 124 pp.), edited by David Selwyn. Especially if you have read and re-read the tiny canon of Austen novels, this collection of poems helps to recreate the world of word-play, riddling, charades, and verbal fun in which their author lived. I especially relished the riddles. □

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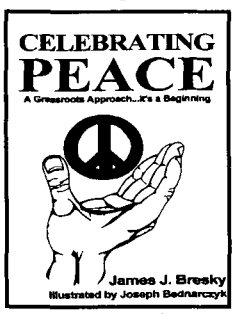

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Thomas Swick

Thomas Swick is the travel editor of the Sun-Sentinel *in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and the author of the travel memoir* Unquiet Days: At Home in Poland.

A collection of pieces gives me the same pleasurable rush of expectation that an all-you-can-eat buffet must give a glutton. It is a mystery to me why publishers hold the form in such low esteem. I still remember my librarian friend coming to the tennis court one late summer afternoon in 1975 and handling with a jeweler's delicacy a newly arrived copy of Cyril Connolly's *The Evening Colonnade*. The table of contents—"Oxford in Our Twenties," "Farewell to Provence," "Little Magazines"—intrigued me more than the chapters of any novel could. There between the covers of a single volume awaited the elegant workings of a well-traveled mind.

I got a similar thrill recently on seeing Pico Iyer's *Tropical Classical: Essays from Several Directions* (Knopf, $25, 314 pp.). In books like *Video Night in Kathmandu* and *The Lady and the Monk*, Iyer has carved a niche as an astute analyst of the subtle and increasingly frequent interchange between East and West. He is a leading voice in the new school of travel writing that no longer simply describes a place but helps to explain it.

Tropical Classical has the traditional literary collection's miscellany—pulling in travel articles, profiles, book reviews, essays. But it differs slightly in that many of its pieces share a theme, which is the happy intermingling in contemporary literature of two seemingly disparate worlds: the sensual tropics and the more cerebral, or at least more structured, northern climes. Iyer picks three distinct genres—poetry, fiction, essays—and finds in each a modern practitioner—Derek Walcott, Michael Ondaatje, and Richard Rodriguez—who has demonstrated "the ability to season high classical forms with a lyrical beauty drawn from the streets and beaches of their homes."

Many of the reviews in this collection are of writers—Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Romesh Gunesekera—who inhabit this new terrain, which Iyer must be the first to have mapped, if not identified. V.S. Naipaul is not included because, though he wrote eloquently of his childhood in Trinidad, he did so in the studied cadences and syntax of the English canon. But I think he should probably be given some credit as a forerunner; he was, in a sense, the Jackie Robinson to Rushdie's Deion Sanders.

The unrelated pieces are no less interesting—travel essays ranging from Ethiopia to New York (a city, Iyer notes rightly, which one always recollects in black and white) and lengthy profiles, including the most enlightening one I've read of the brilliant and reticent travel writer Norman Lewis. The world of collected pieces is in good hands.

The same unfortunately cannot be said for another of my favorite literary forms, collected letters (though it will be interesting to see who will publish the first e-mail correspondence, and who will bother to read it). The immense pleasure I had last month reading *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote & Walker Percy* (W.W. Norton, $27.50, 304 pp.) was surely heightened by the knowledge that it was one of the last of its kind. And no collection could better demonstrate what we stand to lose through this demise.

Shelby Foote and Walker Percy became high school friends in Greenville, Mississippi, in the 1930s, and their correspondence began in 1948 when both were starting out on their writing careers (Percy tentatively, Foote boldly).

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The first half of the book is all Foote, because he did not begin saving Percy's letters until 1970. But he more than fills the stage—lecturing his friend, advising him (especially on whom to read, mainly Proust), boasting shamelessly: "I've begun my book. It's going to be a great book; I feel ten inches taller than Shakespeare." This at the end of a letter that begins: "Good writers are not wise men, nor men with faith; good writing proceeds from doubt. It was Dostoevsky's doubt that made him great."

Percy is, not surprisingly, more subdued, but just as preoccupied with what he describes in one letter as this "strange business." There is little about family here, or current events, or life itself outside of art, though Percy tells of a book he's planning (*Love in the Ruins*) that deals "with the decline and fall of the U.S., the country rent almost hopelessly between the rural knotheaded right and the godless alienated left, worse than the Civil War. Of that and the goodness of God, and of the merriness of living quite anonymously in the suburbs, drinking well, cooking out, attending Mass at the usual silo-and-barn, the goodness of Brunswick bowling alleys...."

The meditations and *aperçus* fly across four decades until the last letter from Percy, in 1989, and the address from Foote at his memorial service. And the sadness you feel over the end of this friendship lingers longer than if it had been a construct of fiction.

The one novel that I've especially enjoyed this year is also a collection of sorts, Paul Theroux's *My Other Life* (Houghton Mifflin, $24.95, 456 pp.). These loosely-linked stories recount, the author has explained, things that could have happened to him, though they also cover a lot that did: the Peace Corps work in Africa, the teaching in Singapore, the travel books, the midlife divorce. But the fact vs. fiction debate becomes irrevelant in the face of Theroux's writing. "Failure," he says at one point, "is a sort of funeral, and a person fleeing a collapsed marriage is both the corpse and the mourner." His is a perpetually interesting voice. □

James Duffy

James Duffy is a writer and retired lawyer living in New York City.

Are You Ready to Step Out of Yourself?" the Irish Tourist Board asks in a current promotion. If you would answer yes, but lack either the time or the wherewithal to venture overseas this summer, I can recommend three novels and a memoir by Irish or Irish-American writers that may enable you to step out of yourself, even though you never leave your backyard hammock.

Angela's Ashes (Scribner, $25, 363 pp.), Frank McCourt's memoir of his boyhood, has already been reviewed in these pages [November 8, 1996]. It has been a national best seller (often in first place on the nonfiction list) and has won both a National Book Critics Award and a Pulitzer Prize. As every reader must know by now, the book describes the author's life to age eighteen, beginning in Brooklyn in 1930 and soon shifting to Limerick. The descriptions of life with his ne'er-do-well, drunken father and hapless mother, and of the family's poverty so grim and deep that it is hard even to imagine, are breathtaking. His daring risks with language are distinctively original, though I was reminded of both James Joyce and Tom Wolfe.

Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (Knopf, $23, 272 pp.) is also an account of coming of age, this time in Derry, Northern Ireland, in the forties and fifties. Almost certainly autobiographical in part, this memoir is cast as a novel. The theme is not poverty, but a secret of the family of the unnamed narrator involving the death or murder of his uncle Eddie, who may or may not have been a heroic IRA fighter. As all such family secrets eventually do, this one becomes known to all with shattering consequences for the boy narrator and his relatives. Although a first novel, the book was short-listed for the Booker Prize in England last year. Deane, heretofore known as a poet, critic, and editor, now resides in Dublin, though he spends

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part of each year teaching Irish studies at the University of Notre Dame.

John Banville's *The Untouchable* (Knopf, $25, 368 pp.) is a fictional memoir of a spy for the Russians modeled, except for his Irishness, on Sir Anthony Blunt. Dying, exposed as a spy and a homosexual at age seventy-two, Victor Maskell attempts to justify his life in a journal ostensibly written for a free-lance woman journalist who wants to write a book about him. Maskell explores and attempts to explain the deep contradictions of his life: Irish, yet the knighted Keeper of the King's Pictures; simultaneously a confidant of the royal family and a Russian spy; married and the father of two, but also an active homosexual. "Did I call it a double life?" he writes. "Quadruple—quintuple—more like."

The reader is unlikely to come to a satisfying judgment of Maskell, as Banville presents him. And many will quarrel with the mean-spirited caricature of Graham Greene in the character Querell. But what most assuredly should attract the reader is Banville's flowing prose style. That the novel is a model of stylish composition should not come as a surprise, since Banville is a seasoned novelist and the literary editor of the *Irish Times*.

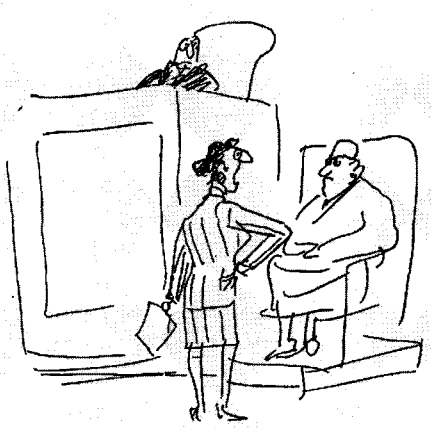
A lighter read is Maeve Binchy's best-selling *Evening Class* (Delacorte, $24.95, 420 pp.), a warm and often amusing account of a night course in the Italian language at a rundown Dublin school. The class is taught by a wonderfully sketched eccentric, Nora O'Donoghue, who has returned after twenty-six years spent in Sicily and is known simply as *Signora*. Binchy manipulates an enormous cast—the highly diverse participants in the course and their relatives and friends—with clever ingenuity. The plot is a marvel, adroitly intertwining the lives of the characters in ways both funny and sad, and the final episode, a class trip to Rome, is a joyride.

These books amply demonstrate the current robust health of Irish letters (a condition also attested to by new works recently published or about to be published by Roddy Doyle, Colm Tóibín, and Edna O'Brien, among others). All four have the distinction of being superbly written in that ancient and dead language called English. □

Molly Finn

Molly Finn, a free-lance writer, lives in New York City. The location of her country cottage is top-secret.

A strong blast of truth is a bracing antidote to the swamp of evasion, deception, euphemism, and self-serving double talk we find ourselves immersed in so often these days. Such a blast is just what Richard Pollak provides in *The Creation of Dr. B* (Simon & Schuster, $28, 478 pp.), his penetrating examination of the life and work of Bruno Bettelheim, one of the major liars of recent times. Using lies, exaggerations, and false claims, in combination with a compelling personality and what must have been a degree of charm, Bettelheim created for himself an impressive set of credentials and a reputation as both a wise and humane child psychiatrist who had unprecedented success in treating autistic children and an authority on the Holocaust as well as several other subjects. People in high places and, especially, a gullible and indulgent press bought wholesale all that Bettelheim claimed for himself. The University of Chicago, which sponsored his famous school, never established an oversight committee or questioned his claims of success; the Ford Foundation gave him a very large grant without checking his credentials or the results of his "research." Robert Coles turned him into



"Lies, all lies!"

"a hero for our time" in the pages of the *New Republic*. And even *Commonweal* published a piece titled "The Holy Work of Bruno Bettelheim," going so far as to extend his wisdom and expertise even beyond the limits he claimed for himself, to include "poverty and inequality in America."

Bettelheim was not an innocuous force. He used his reputation and authority to strike out at large groups of people, causing serious harm and anguish. He accused Jews of "ghetto thinking," conniving in their own destruction through their passive submission to the Nazis who imprisoned them. His attacks on mothers were famous, particularly mothers of autistic children, whom he likened to SS guards and devouring witches. He accused a public gathering of Jewish students of causing anti-Semitism by their refusal to assimilate. In writing this meticulously researched, entirely persuasive biography, Pollak has not only done a service to truth, but he has brought comfort and vindication to the many people who have suffered at Bettelheim's hands.

Another kind of truth-telling is to be found in Pat Barker's remarkable trilogy about World War I (*Regeneration*, Plume, $11.95, 251 pp; *The Eye in the Door*, $10.95, 280 pp; *The Ghost Road*, Plume, $11.95, 277 pp.). Complex, subtle, shocking, Barker's novels portray this hideous war through the effects it had on a set of fascinating characters, some actual, historic people and some fictional. One volume is set mostly in Craiglockhart War Hospital in Scotland, where psychiatrist William Rivers attempts to bring back to life (and ultimately to return to the trenches) the mute or stuttering, nightmare-ridden, paralyzed, obsessed ghosts of the men (recently boys) who went off to fight a short time before. One of his patients is the poet Siegfried Sassoon, who was declared "mentally unsound" when he publicly refused to continue serving as a British officer. It is Rivers's job to restore Sassoon to "sanity" (a state of mind in which he will wish to return to the trenches), setting off a struggle within each and between the two that results in an at best ambiguous outcome. The poet Wilfred

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Owen is another of Rivers's patients; in several scenes we see him with Sassoon, working and reworking a rough draft into a finished poem. Owen's death in battle during the final week of the war, always known as a devastating loss, here becomes poignantly emblematic of the ruinous costs of war. The books are written with an almost magical simplicity that manages to be more expressive than any gnashing of teeth or tearing of hair.

I've had fun reading Michael Ondaatje, not just *The English Patient* (Vintage, $12, 305 pp.) but also its predecessor, *In the Skin of a Lion* (Vintage, $12, 244 pp.), and the hilarious memoir of his childhood in Ceylon (never referred to as Sri Lanka), *Running in the Family* (Vintage, $10, 207 pp.). Learning about his zany family gives the reader some background, if not an explanation of, Ondaatje's almost maniacal intensity and his fascination with exotic places and professions. It would take considerable space to do real justice to these complicated books. For me a lot of their appeal has to do with their intimate portrayal of extreme conditions: of climate and geography, of devastating physical disability, and of the rigors and suspense demanded by the sapper's art and science (*The English Patient*), and the breathtaking dangers undergone by workers who are building a bridge (*In the Skin of a Lion*). The books are vivid—even spellbinding. Forget the movie—it may or it may not be good, but it's something else entirely.

I can't resist mentioning another reading—I should say "reading"—pleasure of this past spring. My husband and I have long been devoted to listening to books on tape as we drive the three hours to and from our country cottage. This year we have watched the spring unfold while listening to David Case read Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* (University of Chicago Press, 4 volumes, $17.95). You can buy these wry, leisurely accounts of literary, artistic, political, and high-society life in prewar London and read them in the usual way. But if you commute by car or have some other occasion to make long drives, I cannot recommend too highly the uncut, expertly (usually) read offerings of Books on Tape (800-626-3333).

P.S. In case you have not already done so, do read Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* this summer. □

Timothy D. Bates

Timothy D. Bates, an attorney practicing in Groton, Connecticut, is on the national board of Family Service America.

Nothing makes a better summer read than murder mysteries. Mysteries tend toward the quick read and provide the studied diversion necessary to fill empty nights at the vacation cottage. They also tend not to weigh much, allowing them to fit easily in back packs. And, most important, they offer the consistent illusion—needed for a reassuring vacation—that rationality and perseverance can overcome life's mysteries, particularly death.

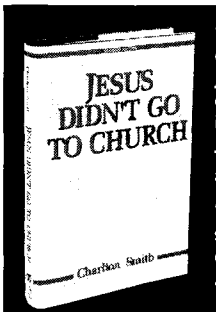
In these days of seemingly relative values and constant uncertainty, this last illusion can prove difficult to perpetuate, but the best mystery writers somehow pull it off. In this spirit, let me suggest the following series.

Lawrence Block's "burglar" series revolves around the careers of Bernie Rhodenbarr, who operates a second-hand Greenwich Village bookstore by day and burglarizes Upper East Side apartments by night. His artistic and financially remunerative burglaries allow him to underwrite his passion for books, while exposing him to more serious crimes, for which he is often a suspect. With emotional guidance from his lesbian companion, Carolyn Kaiser, a Village pet groomer, Bernie manages to extricate himself from these accusations, usually by splitting the loot with the corrupt but well-intentioned cop, Ray Kirschmann, and thereby bringing the guilty to justice. For this quirky and light series, start with *The Burglar Who Thought He Was Bogart* (Dutton, 1995), in which Bernie becomes entangled with a Balkan monarchist conspiracy while attending a Bogart retrospective. Also catch *The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams* (Dutton, 1994), in which Bernie combines his knowledge of thievery, baseball cards, and high finance to ensure the bookstore's financial survival.

James Lee Burke: No longer a secret from the best-seller list, Burke features Dave Robichaux, a detective in New Iberia parish, outside New Orleans. A recovering alcoholic and Vietnam vet, Robichaux seeks to protect his rural enclave from the corruption and commercialism of the Big Easy. Burke, a writing instructor at Wichita State, grew up in New Orleans and describes its texture, diversity, and sleaziness with intensity and love. Detective Robichaux tries to keep himself and his family altogether, but given his violent, alcoholic background and his need to protect his wife, Bootsie, and adopted daughter, that's hard. Robichaux often teams with Cletus Purcel, a free spirit for whom violence comes naturally, to fight the good fight.

Burke's best include *A Morning for Flamingos* (Avon,1990) and *Burning Angel* (Hyperion, 1995). He can overwrite, so avoid *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead* (Avon, 1993), unless you really get hooked on him.

Two other authors come to mind. Marcia Mueller: Her heroine, Sharon McCone, begins her career investigating for the All Souls' Legal Collective in San Francisco. McCone, a single woman trying to make it in a man's world, works to do good for her clients in the face of the need to generate legal fees. Begin with *Trophies and Dead Things* (The Mystery Press, 1990).



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Stephen Greenleaf: Greenleaf is in limited print these days but worth the search. Reminiscent of Sam Spade, Greenleaf's John Tanner series captures a kind of cynicism that is inextricably linked with the urge to do good. Tanner, a rugged loner, charts his course through the counterculture as well as the big-time commercialism of the Bay Area. Greenleaf's best include *Book Case* (William Morrow & Co., 1991) and *Death Bed* (The Dial Press, 1980). All of these conflicted heroes lead unusual and sometimes tortured lives, which often force them to take violent action to protect their clients and sense of honor. Society at large rarely proves to be much help. In short, the perfect frame of mind for a day at the beach. □

Margaret Steinfels

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels is the editor of Commonweal.

When I was young, I detested the novels of Henry James and Willa Cather—too much of nothing going on. The busy heroes and heroines of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen were far more appealing and readable; they did not dally in landscapes either psychic or scenic. Eventually I learned to read and even admire James, but never Cather.

A few summers ago, I spent some time in Taos, New Mexico, one of Cather's landscapes. Back home, I tried *Death Comes for the Archbishop* yet again. In contrast to my teen-age disdain for what seemed a desiccated travelogue, I found the story deeply moving and oddly inspiring. Over this Southwest amber landscape of scrub and cactus, of red-gold hills and dark plateaus, the light and air played like some great antiphonal chant. I could see it. I could see the archbishop, Jean Marie Latour; the fawn-colored mules, Contento and Angelica; Latour's ceaseless effort to bring the church to life. I could see the intense blue sky broken by a steady telegraphic flow of clouds; see the glowing light of dawn and dusk; and see the air so clear it seemed glowing too. I could even see Kit Carson's house, today a museum maintained by his Masonic order!

To appreciate Cather's achievement, must the reader know the landscape in which she set Archbishop Latour and his soulmate, Father Valliant? Or has this reader, anyway, finally learned to read without the reward of something clearly and definitively happening?

Over the last year, I have gone on to one of Cather's novellas, *The Professor's House*, set on an unspecified Great Lake, woodsy, leafy green in the summer, white and cold in the winter, in a university town where little seems to happen except that the life of a middle-aged man is subtly but utterly transformed by his—well, doing nothing. This summer I will take up what I set aside last winter, *Shadows on the Rock*. All three are collected in the Library of America edition, *Willa Cather, Later Novels*, ($35, 991 pp.). (In a letter to the editor of *Commonweal*, November 23, 1927, Cather gives a brief account of how she came to write the story. Guess I wasn't reading yet!)

"Catching up" by overcoming the partialities of youth is one criterion for summer reading. Simply catching up is another. I began early this spring the autobiography of Katherine Graham, *Personal History* (Knopf, $29.95, 625 pp.). Too big to carry along on planes, trains, or subways, the book settled to the bottom of a pile by the bed as my attention strayed. In July, I intend to pick it up again and read right through. It seems to fall into the category: Rich people have problems too. Though I am temporarily stopped in the second chapter, it is clear that Katherine Meyer Graham is destined to overcome the constraining life of the little rich girl and do remarkable things. I want to know more.

Despite lagging behind on Graham's very long volume, I own up to carting around and reading from cover to cover a volume almost as large. I could not leave *Rising Tides* at home. John M. Barry's engrossing history, subtitled, *The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (Simon and Schuster, $27.50, 524 pp.), recounts the effort from the 1850s through the great flood of 1927 to tame the Mississippi of its regular and rampant overflow; an appendix, "The River Today," brings the story up to date.

The Mississippi River Valley along with its tributaries drains 41 percent of the United States, encompassing thirty-one states as far apart as New York, North Carolina, Idaho, and New Mexico. Only the Amazon basin is significantly larger. With that geography lesson, Barry begins a history, which encompasses the moral, social, intellectual, econom-

"I don't think it works as a graphic novel, Miss Austen. Quite frankly, Mr. Darcy's super strength and x-ray vision make nonsense of the plot."

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ic, and technological struggles that the United States faced from before the Civil War until after World War I. He does this by focusing on the effort to preserve the richest farm land in the world from the rampaging waters of the river that had created that very farm land.

The book opens with biographical sketches of James Buchanan Eads and Andrew Atkinson Humphreys who contested the very definition of control; Eads, a self-taught civil engineer, and Humphreys, head of the Army Corps of Engineers, had sharply contrasting ideas about controlling the river. Eads was more right than wrong, and Humphreys more wrong than right, but the Corps' institutional longevity and political weight came to dictate a levees-only policy that magnified the damage of each succeeding flood, as Eads had predicted.

There is the story of New Orleans, among the richest and most powerful U.S. cities before the Great Depression, which destroyed itself morally, economically, and politically by unnecessarily dynamiting the levee of a neighboring Louisiana parish during the 1927 flood, and then reneging on promises of restitution.

There is the Percy family (Walker Percy is a descendant) of Greenville, Mississippi, exemplifying all the well-meaning delusions of race and class. Their blacks-only policy of sharecropping, which they considered enlightened, was shown during the 1927 flood to be simply another form of forced servitude. To keep blacks from moving north, Leroy Percy had them confined to the tops of the levees under armed guard. Their labor was precious, but not their lives or their dignity.

And along with much, much more, there was the man who made political hay of the flood, Herbert Hoover. He got himself elected president on the publicity of seeming to offer a well-ordered relief plan to hundreds of thousands of people turned out from homes and land by the flood.

We all know what happened to Hoover; but the rest of this history is worth recalling, for we continue to live with its consequences. □

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 4)

Carroll on JPII

I was pleased to read Paul Baumann's commentary on James Carroll's *New Yorker* article about silence, absolutism, and John Paul II. Baumann helped me sort out some of the discontent I felt with Carroll's article. And, along with the John D. Spalding interview with Carroll, Baumann also helped me clarify my discontent with John Paul II.

The question of the historical significance of John Paul II has become important for me, especially when I hear him described as the monumental Catholic personality and presence of our century. If I were to compare the current papacy to an icon, I would say that the pope's exaltation of human dignity is the gold background, a wash of divine brilliance. I think, however, that his face will quickly fade. He has never been able to speak the truly daring, to talk of new roles and responsibilities: for women, the divorced, gays, married priests, challenging intellectuals. Thus, I can understand why James Carroll hears only silence in the Vatican and stumbles into self-protecting absolutism everywhere within its walls. I find this experience of silence and absolutism the frightening part of the story.

Baumann asks us to review the facts, and so I do. But I am still uneasy.

JOHN SHEKLETON
Minneapolis, Minn.

Defining comes second

In his column for May 23 John Garvey provides a poor argument for exclusion from Communion of those not sharing the same definition of Christ's sacrament. The real differences about the meaning of the Eucharist among the various churches ought not be denied or trivialized, but that should not be allowed to obscure the underlying experience of community through reception of the sacrament by all who

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call themselves Christians. To do so is to put the definitional cart before the sacramental horse.

It is perhaps useful to remind ourselves that nowhere among the beatitudes is one proclaiming blessedness for those who correctly understand and properly define their religious experience. The doers rather than the thinkers have primacy of place.

G. MICHAEL MCCROSSIN
Corpus Christi, Tex.

Stress what unites

John Garvey's description of the disunity of the Christian churches, exemplified in his opinion by differing views of Holy Communion, emphasized what divides us at the expense of what unites us.

Every Christian unites in proclaiming what the Eucharistic Prayer terms "the mystery of faith": "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." But not even every Catholic believes in transubstantiation.

It is by eating the bread and drinking from the cup that we proclaim the mystery of faith. Faith is not an "either/or"—it's a lifelong journey. Far from being a starting point, our shared understanding of the faith is the culmination of our pilgrim journey. It's the end, not the prerequisite!

BILL MCMURRAY
Saint Joseph, Mo.

The writer replies:

It seems likely that the phrase "sacramental horse" appears in print for the first time ever in Mr. McCrossin's letter.

More substantively: Doing and thinking aren't divided. Orthodox spirituality calls for "the descent of the mind into the heart." People who think without correct action aren't even thinking correctly—but that's the sadness of the fall.

We aren't talking about "Christ's sacrament," as if there were a division between the Lord and his presence, but about the Body of Christ. What the church is, and understanding this correctly, matters. Paul says (I Corinthians 11:29) that anyone "who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks condemnation upon himself." I know few people believe in condemnation these days, but it certainly is scriptural, and I fear it myself. An Orthodox prayer before Communion asks, "May I not be burned." The body Paul refers to is the body of Christ, the church, and the church and its Lord are not separate. It matters what we think about them.

Since those places we agree about are fairly well defined, what matters even more—if we are to move toward real unity—is genuine clarity about what separates us. *Pace* Mr. McMurray, faith is at the beginning an either/or thing: "Do you believe in the Son of man?" "Who do you say that I am?" It is the beginning of a journey, this tough thing, and not the end. These are hard sayings in a society which thinks that "Whatever" is a real answer to a real question, but there we are.

JOHN GARVEY

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THEY WILL BE ALL RIGHT

Amy Welborn

We're on our way back from the midweek, Mom-can't-cook-tonight fast-food dinner, and I pull into the service station near my house to fill up the tank for the upcoming week of chauffering duties.

The boys are engaged in routine, ritualized bickering as they exit through the one working door in the back, and one of them must come to the front to open my daughter's front door; the handle on the passenger side is broken. Next paycheck, I tell them, it will all be fixed. Maybe. I give them the house key and tell them to walk the short distance to our house and start their homework.

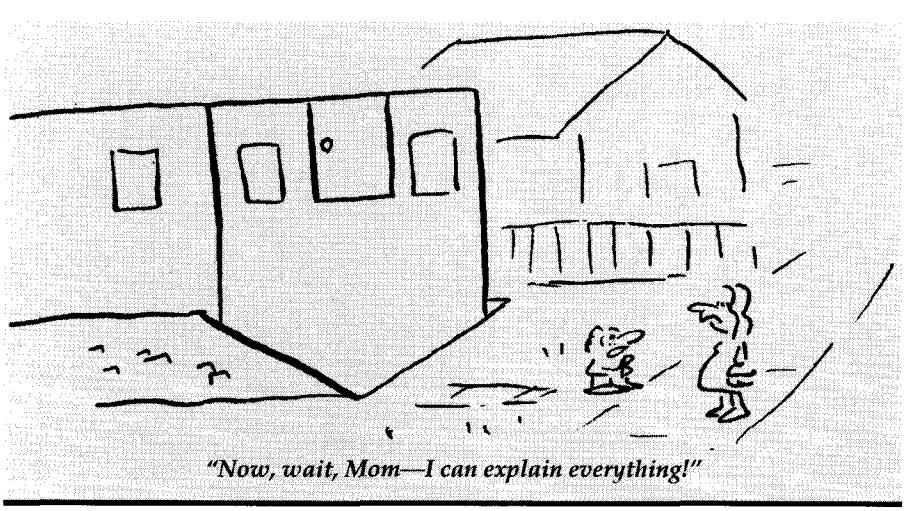
For a moment, I am busy fitting the gas hose into my tank; when I look up they are well on their way, halfway across the parking lot. Little sister Katie is in the middle, holding the hands of her two brothers on either side. I can hear that they've picked up on a conversation begun in the car, reciting again what to them are the hysterically funny bits of a Monty Python movie. Katie's head turns from side to side as she follows the conversation. The jokes are beyond her, but she laughs because the boys do.

I don't know whether it's the fumes rising from the gas tanks or the humidity rising from the Florida earth, but for a moment my children appear to be floating in ripples of air, figures in a dream, a little girl skipping between boys whose hold on her small hands seems careless but, I can tell even from an increasing distance, is actually as unyielding as Egyptian mortar.

And, leaning against my car in the stillness of early evening, something sweeps over me that is weightier than a thought, stronger than a feeling. It is knowledge from the place where truth resides, perhaps within me, perhaps somewhere else. It is a gift I did not ask for but cannot ignore. *They will be all right*, it whispers.

Like a great many others, I have spent the biggest part of my mothering years—almost fifteen of them now—worrying. With cause. Parents in America have reason to fret over how to rear decent human beings in an often corrupt and degrading culture, threatened by economic insecurity, hearing daily about violence almost everywhere.

And we have our own histories, our particular family stories that make us fear, in a psychologized age, that our children will be damaged beyond repair, or propelled into life-long therapy.



"Now, wait, Mom—I can explain everything!"

For me, as for many, it is divorce: a divorce I instigated when my oldest son was ten, at a time when I looked at the rest of my life and saw it as one long, dark tunnel. But was I being selfish? Are we all better off? I've kept asking, even though the children seem to understand, even though my oldest has told me, more than once, that it's better that his father and I are no longer married.

I worry too about their spiritual lives. Catholic schools, weekly Mass, constant discussions of religion at home; but is it enough? Is God real for them? When they are tempted to quell their restlessness with drugs, drink, or premature sex, will they find peace instead in God?

Most parents worry *because* our families are not quite the families we thought we would build, our world has not evolved as we expected. Are we doing enough? Will they be okay?

This evening, I get my answer: They will be all right.

Tears gather unbidden in the corners of my eyes, and my throat tightens in gratitude for the gift. I follow the three unique and precious people born from my body, assured that they have reached their destination safely.

I had driven them this far in this slightly shabby yet still serviceable vehicle, the only one available to me, and they had spilled out of it, sent to go the rest of the way on their own. They are out of sight and hearing now, but the One who molded them within me assures me that I have indeed done enough because it was all I could do, and they have all the confidence they need to go the rest of the way, and unlock the doors to whatever places they will call home. □

Amy Welborn *writes a youth column for the Catholic News Service. She lives in Lakeland, Florida.*

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